



5

Dragon
Menace of
Macallan

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

Full clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with Zero Believers





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C O N T E N T S

Prologue	<i>The Water Goddess's Prophecy</i>
Chapter 1	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Returns to Macallan</i>
Chapter 2	<i>Makoto Takatsuki's Old Haunts</i>
Chapter 3	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with His Goddess</i>
Chapter 4	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Learns Mana Blade</i>
Chapter 5	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Faces Danger</i>
Chapter 6	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with the Priestess of the Moon</i>
Chapter 7	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Heads for Cameron</i>
Chapter 8	<i>Makoto Takatsuki Searches for the Ghost Ship</i>
Epilogue	<i>Banquet in Cameron</i>

Prologue: The Water Goddess's Prophecy

Princess Sophia (or more accurately, Eir in Sophia's body) smiled, her eyes a beguiling gold. But then, an ominous statement left her lips.

"At this rate, Roses will fall."

"What's going to happen?" I asked. After all, Eir was the goddess that protected Roses.

"Well...not even I know that," she replied.

"Not even you...? But you're...Eir."

There are things the gods don't know?

"Of course there are," Eir said. "We goddesses aren't omnipotent. Or did you think we were all perfect beings, Mako?"

That brought a memory of my own goddess to mind—after Fujiyan had appraised my dagger and I'd discovered that it belonged to a wicked deity, I could remember Noah sinking down to her knees before me.

"No...I understand that you're not."

"Right? So I want you to investigate my revelation. But all of that would just worry Sophie and Leo, so keep it quiet."

I let out a hesitant noise. *I have to keep the prophecy a secret from Princess Sophia?*

"Yes! It's a private matter between Sophie's goddess and you, Mako!" Eir said meaningfully. Not a second later, her golden eyes abruptly returned to their normal color.

"O-Oh...I must have fallen asleep..." Princess Sophia was once again in her own body, though her blue eyes looked somewhat vacant. Otherwise, she seemed to be back to normal. "Hero Makoto...? Did something happen?"

Something sure did—Eir had delivered a prophecy that Roses would fall... I

couldn't say so, though.

"Nope. We should head back," I said, offering her a smile and hiding my unease.

"Personally, I think we could sta—"

I cut her off gently. "All riiight, back we go."

"Hmph."

Even as I soothed her on our way to the castle, I thought of what was to come. We'd escaped the danger facing Highland, but there was apparently no time to take it easy.

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Returns to Macallan

The largest capital on the western continent—Symphonia—shrank into the distance. Yet, even as far away as it was, the huge castle stood visibly over it all.

“Highland Castle’s actually enormous,” I mused, watching it on the horizon.

“It is an eyesore.” I heard from my side. That was Furiae’s voice. Guess she hated the castle...or maybe it was the country itself. Honestly, if I had to guess, I would say she hated both.

I watched her long hair trailing in the rushing wind. She must’ve realized I was staring because she turned to face me.

“So, my knight—what is this ‘Macallan’ like?”

“Hm, I don’t know what to tell you,” I answered. “It’s just a standard peaceful village out in the countryside...”

I was wondering how to accurately describe it when my thoughts were interrupted by nervous yells from Lucy and Sasa.

“Makoto! Look!”

“Up there, Takatsuki!”

A huge shadow passed over our heads. Was that...a wing?

What? A wyvern?

Just then, someone leaped down to the deck with a thud. The man had shining blond hair, gleaming golden armor, and a sharp look glimmered in his blue eyes.

“Oi, Hero of Roses! What do you think you’re running off for?!”

This could be none other than the Hero of Lightning, Gerald. A grand wyvern was also circling above us.

“Well, my job’s done, so I’m going home,” I explained.

His forehead creased. “So you’re quitting while you’re ahead... I guess we can

have our rematch during Great Keith's tournament then. I'll win next time!"

Bleh, a rematch? I'd rather not. I've gotta get out of it somehow.

After some time spent thinking rather than answering, I spoke. "How about this: we decide who wins based on whoever defeats the most demon lords during the Northern Front Plan."

"You want to...what?" That was some glare he had. Still, he thought it over for a moment, and his expression soon turned to one of acceptance.

"Fine, then." After his curt answer, he leaped back to his wyvern.

Phew, Gerald went for it.

"Are you sure you should've said that?" Lucy asked.

"Can you even defeat one on your own?" Sasa added worriedly.

"It's fine...as long as I get out of a rematch." Gerald's desire to fight constantly had been enough of a pain already. Besides, I'd rather train with Undyne some more.

Although I hadn't managed to summon her once since the battle... Maybe I should speak with Noah about it.

"Mister Takatsuki, are you close with the Hero of Lightning now'h?" Nina asked.

"He did chase us down proactively," commented Chris.

Both of them were looking after Gerald, who'd left as quickly as he'd arrived.

"It seems that he came to see our esteemed Tackie off," Fujiyan said absentmindedly. He must've figured that out using *Mind Reading*.

I balked. "Really?" So, yeah...I guess Gerald's a *tsundere*. Who needs a *guy* acting like that?

For a while after that, the journey continued peacefully.

"So this is the view from an airship..." Furiae said breathily. Her eyes roamed across the scenery tirelessly as the land passed beneath us.

I walked up to her side. "Is this your first time flying on one?"

“I was born and raised in the ruins of Laphroaig... The first time I left my country was when Highland dragged me away.”

I saw a sorrowful look on the profile of her face. She probably wanted to go back. Laphroaig wasn't safe in any respect though, so we couldn't just drop her off.

As I was pondering that, she asked me a question in return. “So, my knight, the place where you were born... What was it like?”

“Me?” Should I describe Tokyo? It would be pretty difficult to explain all of that to someone from this world.

Eventually, I just started. “There were buildings three times taller than Highland castle all over the place. People drove around in massive hunks of metal. There were also carriages that held hundreds of people. Adults used those every day to commute to work, all dead-eyed.”

“That's quite different from what Ryouzuke described,” she commented with an adorable tilt of her head.

“What'd Sakurai say?”

“That there were no monsters, the world was peaceful, and people weren't killed for their race.”

“Did he?” I asked after a pause.

“Is that wrong? He *did* call it peaceful.”

Even if there hadn't been open war, there'd still been conflict in my old world...and even if the segregation here manifested differently, there'd been plenty of racial discrimination on Earth. Also, there was no magic, and you couldn't go on adventures. Looking back, it honestly seemed pretty boring to me.

“You missed something, Takatsuki!” Sasa interrupted. “Tokyo's got lots of shops for sweet stuff!”

This world didn't have enough sweet things for her. Sugar *was* a luxury good, so there was nothing we could do.

“So are you from that world as well, warrior?” Furiae asked.

“Yup! Nice to meet you, Princess!” Sasa replied with a grin.

“You don’t need to call me that. My guardian knight is the only one I’ve ordered to do so.”

“So that’s how it works?” Sasa seemed puzzled.

This was the first I’d heard of it too. It must be some custom.

“What shall I call you, then? Just Furiae?”

“Everyone!” Fujiyan exclaimed, cutting in without warning. “Wait a moment, if you would. Using Lady Furiae’s name in Macallan will be dangerous. The Priestess of the Moon’s name is famous, so I believe it would be best for her to adopt a *nom de guerre*.”

That did make sense.

“My name is known so widely?” Furiae wondered with a frown.

“If people hear your name and see what you look like, they’ll almost all connect the dots’h.”

Furiae was beautiful. If she passed ten people on the street, all ten would turn to look. And since her name was known widely across the continent... Yup, she’d be revealed right off.

“Do you have a good one to use?” I asked her.

“Well, that was out of nowhere...” She frowned again, but we were all set to brainstorm a new name. After thinking for a little while, she decided. “I’ll go with Fuuri.” It was only a slight change from her original name, and it made for an easy alias.

“Right, Fuu it is, then,” Sasa declared, immediately disregarding the princess’s chosen name. Was there any point to the alias if Sasa was just going to ignore it like that?

“What’s going on?” Lucy asked as she skipped over. “What’re you all talking about?”

“Lucy, Princess Furiae is Princess Fuuri from now on,” I told her.

“Uh? Why?”

“Also,” I continued, “she’s some noble from another country that I’m protecting.” If I was supposed to be referring to her as “princess,” then that story would work.

We explained the rest of the reasoning after that.

“Hm, got it. Nice to meet you then, Fuuri!”

“Indeed, mage.”

The princess really didn’t call people by name, did she? She even called me “my knight.” Maybe she was putting walls between us.

Welp, I’ll just need to work my way through them, bit by bit.

I glanced out at the scenery. Rolling green spread out in every direction as far as the eye could see. It was a vast, fertile land, so I could understand why Highland was so prosperous. The environment here really was different from the forests and lakes of Roses.

Still...I preferred Roses. I was glad to be heading back.

“There has been a complication...” Fujiyan informed us over dinner. There was a magic communication device in his hand. Chris was standing at his side with a sour look on her face.

“What’s up, Fujiyan?”

“We’ve been anticipating an upcoming conference that will choose who inherits the mantle of Lord Macallan. However, we just found out that this conference is to be held imminently.”

“That came out of nowhere,” I commented. The current lord had three children, all of them women. Christina was the second eldest.

“I believe my siblings conspired to make it happen this way,” Chris said with an annoyed twist to her lips. “They must have thought that my husband being away for so long was a good opportunity.”

“We need to get back there quick’h,” Nina urged, tugging on Chris’s sleeve.

“My esteemed Tackie—I must apologize, but we will be returning to Macallan

with all possible haste. We must prepare to take part in this conference. As you are the Hero of Roses, I may wish to ask for your assist—”

“Don’t be so reserved about it, Fujiyan. Just ask and I’ll help.”

“Mister Takatsuki’h...”

“Hero...”

My promise might’ve earned a grateful look from both of the women, but what else could I tell him? I owed Fujiyan. He was on my side, even if I was following a wicked deity, so I had to pay that loyalty back as best I could. Though...I had no idea what was involved in an inheritance dispute for nobility. I just hoped I’d be able to help.

The faster speed meant that we got back to Macallan in about half the time that it had taken us on the journey out.

“This is where we part ways, then,” Fujiyan said as they strode off the airship.

I turned to the other three girls. “We should go say hi at the guild,” I suggested.

“Right! I’ve missed Mary and Emily,” Lucy replied.

“I want some of those skewers,” Sasa said.

Furiae simply replied, “I will accompany you.”

No objections, then. We were back home!

With that, we set off to see our friends again.

◇ Furiae’s Perspective ◇

It’s a beautiful town...

That cliché was my first impression of Macallan once we arrived. The streets were well-maintained and had canals running along them. Brick-built houses lined the roads. There were humans, elves, and all kinds of beastmen going about their business, all giving friendly greetings.

The children running around were all smiling too.

It’s not fair... This is nothing like Laphroaig.

Laphroaig was nothing but a ruined husk of a country. It was lawless, and women and children couldn't travel alone. The safest place was the underground, and that was where the weak eked out what life they could. For as long as I could remember, I'd lived in that filthy underground. The people that had taken care of me were Naya's believers. They'd barely scraped by, earning only enough to stay alive.

I didn't even know my own parents.

There hadn't been anything enjoyable in my life—I'd just existed.

Compared to that, Macallan was dazzling.

If I'd been born and raised in a place like this...

My path started to weave, and someone suddenly grabbed my hand.

"Watch it," warned my knight, pulling me to the side.

"Wha?" Apparently, I'd been about to fall into the water.

My knight just looked at me, his eyes asking what I was playing at.

"Thank you...my knight."

"Be more careful, Princess," he said, immediately letting go. He carried on ahead and I stared at his back.

He didn't even hesitate to touch me...

In Laphroaig, I'd been called the cursed priestess and no one had ever dared to get close to me. People had said it was due to awe...but it'd more likely been due to fear. The Highland lot had been the same—they'd been scared of my curses, so no one had ever approached. That's why I'd used my *Charm* on them.

But my knight was different.

My *Charm* had no effect on him.

He didn't care about the curses I held.

And he wouldn't hesitate to touch me.

"Makoto! It's been too long since we were last here!" the mage cheered.

"Let's go to the hot springs!" the warrior added.

Both of them clung to his sides.

“What?! We’re in public!” His face reddened as he tried to escape their grasp. My *Charm* might not affect him, but his female friends certainly did...

He was my knight, but he didn’t turn back as he continued onward.

Wait, actually, he stopped.

“Come on, Princess,” he said, turning just his head to face me. “We’re almost at the guild.”

I pushed *Charm* magic into my eyes, but he didn’t seem to notice as he met my gaze. It was like he just didn’t care.

This is a new feeling... It’s kind of refreshing...

They entered a big building in the middle of town, and the two girls called out to me from inside.

“Come on, Fuu!”

“Hurry up, Fuuri.”

I don’t think I’ve ever felt like this before...

Taking a deep breath, I stepped inside.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“Makoto?!”

The moment I entered, a blonde beauty grabbed hold of me.

Whoof... Her chest...is pressing into me.

“I’m back, Mary.”

“Welcome home!” she cheered, tightening the hug.

It was pleasant, but the looks I was getting from everyone else were less so. I could hear them clicking their tongues at me. I guess Mary was as popular as ever...

“Who is the woman embracing my knight?” I heard Furiae ask.

“She works for the guild,” Sasa answered. “Her name’s Mary.”

“Lucy! You’re back!”

“Emily! It’s been ages!”

I could hear my other friends meeting up behind us as well.

“Yo, Makoto! I take my eyes off you for a second and you end up a hero?!”

This exclamation was accompanied by a slap to my back.

I turned to look and saw one of Macallan’s veterans. “Lucas, it’s been a while.”

“I suppose you *are* an otherworlder.” He chuckled with an almost regretful look. I’d never seen that expression on his face before.

“I never thought you’d become a hero!” Another hand slapped my back, this time on the other side. “Congrats, you bastard!”

As I looked that way, I saw an adventurer from my generation who was closer to my age. “Jean, good to see you again.” I spied a silver badge shining on his chest. “You made silver rank?”

“Thought I’d finally caught up to you...” he replied with a rueful grin.

“My adventurer rank *is* still silver,” I told him.

“It’s not the same, Makoto,” Mary explained with a serious look. “Heroes are representatives of the country’s warriors. Adventurers and knights both serve the country and count under that structure.”

“They...are?” Putting it like that made my hero status feel like a heavy burden.

“Come on, Makoto! Tell me about *everything*,” Mary wheedled as she guided us over to a big table.

“What about your job?” I asked her.

“It’s all good. Welcoming a hero counts as work for the guild,” she said with a grin and a wink. Was she using me as an excuse for some afternoon drinking?

Well, whatever. I hadn’t been here for a while, so there was a lot to talk about.

A hearty “cheers!” sounded from around the whole area. Somehow, pretty much everyone in the building had gathered together. There was a selection of

Macallan's finest on the table. I transferred some to my plate as I listened to the conversations going on.

"*Makoto* became a hero, then..."

"Man, we should have gotten closer to him."

"You were the one that said he was unreliable."

"I mean, he's an apprentice mage."

"Yeah, that's true."

Guys...you know I can hear you, right?

My *Listen* skill picked it all up. After all, I was curious about the rumors.

"Hey, who's the favorite now that Makoto's a hero?" I heard Emily ask Lucy and Sasa.

"Me, obviously," replied Lucy. "Aya's in second."

"Nope, it's me! You got to know him after me!" argued Sasa.

The two of them were staring—or more like glaring—at each other.

"I kissed him first, and I joined his party first as well," Lucy pointed out.

Sasa exhaled a put-upon sigh. "I've been his only friend since junior high."

"That was in your last life! In *this* world, I'm first!"

"That doesn't matter. I met him first."

The two started to growl out rebuttals at each other.

That was a rather ominous conversation... Yup, not going over there anytime soon.

"Hey, Makoto, you must have eaten all sorts of delicious food in the capital, right? Are you sure you still want horned rabbit skewers?"

"Chef, this is definitely what I want to eat." I gave a mental cheer at the sight of them before biting into the piping hot, juicy meat.

Junk food... It's been too long. This is where it's at.

"What is this?" Furiae asked, pointing curiously at the meat.

“Horned rabbit cooked on a skewer. Give it a try.”

“I-I’ve never eaten rabbit before...” Cautiously, she reached a hand out, grabbed one, and then bit into the meat on the skewer. “Oh, that’s delicious.”

“Right?”

She liked them too.

“Heyyy, Makoto, who’s the beauty?” Mary asked.

“Oh, she’s—” I started to speak, but the aforementioned beauty interrupted.

“It is nice to meet you. My name’s Fuuri and I come from Cameron. Circumstances have led me to ask Hero Makoto to protect me. I am related to nobility, but please pardon me for not giving my family name.” She said all of this with an elegant smile. Turns out, she was a master actress...

“O-Of course. I’m Mary Gold, and I work for the adventurer’s guild here...” Mary seemed somewhat overwhelmed by the role Furiae put on.

By claiming that she was nobility from Cameron—a country far from Roses—but not offering her family name, Furiae would make people assume things. Perhaps they would think that there was an inheritance dispute, or maybe that her noble title was somehow illegitimate.

It should make them wonder. In truth, though, her whole spiel was an utter lie.

“Hm, nobility from Cameron...” It was a good thing that Mary was so easy to convince when she was drunk. She didn’t suspect a thing.

“Hey, Makoto,” Lucas greeted. “Are you going to drink too?” He downed his spirits, ordering the next as he spoke to me. “Normally, a hero would live in the capital.”

“Macallan is a calm place,” I answered. *Is he drinking too much? He’s definitely downing more than usual.*

Chef laughed at Lucas, then turned to me. “He’s just jealous that you became a hero.”

“Shaddap!” snapped Lucas. “I never could!”

Jean and I stared at each other in shock at the pair's exchange.

"Lucas here was trying to become a hero," Chef explained to us. "He even managed to climb all the way to the highest rank of adventurers—mythril."

"That's in the past now," Lucas said after a pause. "Now I'm just a washed-up retiree back down at gold."

I never knew that.

"Lucas isn't the only one. All the adventurers of our generation wanted to be heroes," Chef commented wistfully.

I felt kind of bad that I'd managed it with essentially no experience.

"Well, hold your head high! You saved our capital," Lucas said, clapping me on the shoulder. "Not just anyone could have done that."

"It just...happened to go well. Speaking of Roses though, how's Macallan been recently?" I asked.

"Lately, there have been more monsters coming out of the Forest of Fiends," Jean told me with a serious expression. "There've been requests pretty much daily to clean up the stragglers."

"The Forest of Fiends..." That was the name of a dungeon within the Great Forest that covered most of Springrogue.

The recommended rank for taking it on was the same as Labyrinthos—iron.

"A group of silver ranks went to investigate, but they haven't come back," Lucas told me.

I peered at him in shock. "That's really bad, isn't it...?" Silver rank adventurers going missing was no laughing matter.

"Springrogue controls the Forest of Fiends. Guilds from Roses can't interfere too much or things will get more complicated," Chef explained. "We're on the border, so it puts us in a bind."

Since I'd been away from home, things had gotten much more dangerous. Eir's prophecy echoed quietly in my head.

No way, something like this couldn't bring the whole country down...or, at

least, it shouldn't...

“Are the monsters behaving differently because the Great Demon Lord is on the rise...?” I asked.

“Hmm... Well, a demon lord’s grave lies in the heart of the Forest of Fiends, so it might be connected,” mused Chef.

So the resting place of one of the demon lords was somewhere inside the Forest of Fiends. A thousand years ago, Abel the Savior *had* defeated one of the nine demon lords there—Bifrons, the Undead King. His remains were apparently sealed within.

“That was supposed to be where the legendary archer Johnnie and the Grandsage sealed the Undead King’s body, right? Because it would never decay?” I asked.

“I looked once,” Lucas said, “but I couldn’t find the place.”

“You went into the Forest of Fiends?”

“In the past, yes,” he replied. “That was before the monsters started to get more active. The trees block so much light that it’s pitch-black even at noon. On top of that, it’s just as disorienting as the Wayward Woods. And on top of *that*, the monsters aren’t consistently dangerous. You’ll see weak ghosts floating around and then stumble across a calamity level zombie dragon.”

Yeah, that sounds like a nasty place.

“Honestly, I found it worse than the lower layer of Labyrinthos,” Lucas admitted.

“Right,” Jean said, turning to me. “By the way, Makoto, how far down in The Great Maze did you go?”

“Nearly died in the middle layer,” I told them. They all gave simultaneous sighs.

The Forest of Fiends was too much for us.

“So...why’d you go there?” I asked Lucas.

“You don’t know? The legend says that one of Abel the Savior’s treasures is in

there. Well, the legend also says that it's unusable because of the Undead King's curse...so I guess it's useless. It'd still sell for a fortune, though."

"Oh, I see..."

A cursed legendary weapon. Our Furiae could probably get rid of the dark magic. I glanced toward the curse pro.

"This food is delicious," she commented.

"You eat well, little miss," Chef said as she packed away more skewers.

"I like them," she answered, licking the sauce from her fingers. Her manners were slightly poor, but the sight of Furiae's scarlet tongue lapping across her porcelain fingers was rather bewitching. Well, it was hot, anyway.

I heard several gulps around us, and she seemed to have noticed that all the men were staring at her.

"Ungh!" exclaimed one adventurer.

"What a lovely person."

"Wh-Who is that?"

"She said her name's Fuuri."

"Go talk to her."

"She's with Makoto."

"Damn it, aren't Lucy and Aya enough for him...?"

They all seemed taken in by her eroticism.

The women, though, looked far less happy.

She's just too charming, even without her skill... I'd need to warn her later.

"Makoto, let's drink together!" Lucy cheered.

"I'll pour you a glass!" declared Sasa.

They must have escaped from Emily's barrage of questions.

"Um, this...is kinda cramped."

They had squeezed in around me and now I was sandwiched between the two

of them. Lucy's warm skin on one side was contrasted by the chill from Sasa's on the other... I couldn't relax.

"Oh, a flower on each arm? Let me join in," Mary crooned. She reached around to hug me from behind.

Forget it, I'm just going to drink.

And that's exactly what I did until late into the night.

Dawn broke the next day.

It's been a while, I thought as I opened my eyes to the shared area of the guild. It was still slightly scruffy. In this room, a bunch of (male) adventurers were all sleeping in a clump, snoring. I folded up my blanket and put it in the corner.

Sasa, Furiae, and Lucy had all shared a room. Furiae wasn't an adventurer, so she wouldn't sleep in here.

Hmmm, I wonder if they got along.

I rubbed my eyes, still sleepy, before heading to the well behind the building to wash my face. Then, I used some water magic to clean the rest of my body and my clothes. Once I was done, I took my dagger in both hands and prayed to Noah.

The morning sun gleamed off the water.

I knew that the others would meet up with me at the guild later, so I decided to check the request board while I waited.

"H-Help me! I want to hire the goblin extermination expert of Macallan!"

The early hour meant that the reception area was pretty much deserted, so the yell echoed around the room.

Goblin extermination expert?

Before I knew it, everyone was staring at me. Macallan's Goblin Cleaner... That'd been my...awful...nickname. I'd almost forgotten...

Regardless, I spoke to the man that had rushed in. "Um... I can hear you out?"

“Oh! You’re the expert?! My daughter! My daughter...”

Eventually, he managed to get the whole story out. The man and his daughter were merchants in the neighboring town. Last night, goblins had attacked her. These goblins apparently had a leader, a goblin king. His daughter had a barrier item, and while it was active, the goblins couldn’t reach her, but it would only last for about half a day. It had about an hour’s worth of power left, and then...

“Ahhh...my daughter will be eaten!” the man wailed.

“You came from the next town? Why didn’t you make the request there?” Mary had arrived partway through the story, and she tried to calm the man.

Phew, guild staff would know how to deal with him. Although, with how much she’d drunk yesterday, I was surprised to see her sober now.

“Well...there were no adventurers that could do so... The guild staff said that Macallan had an expert in goblin extermination, so asking here would be best...”

Mary sighed. “I see, so Makoto.” She nodded in understanding. “He’s a hero, though, so that puts the price at a million...”

“A million?!” the man and I yelled at the same time.

“Uh... So, I’d heard of this expert, but...they’re a hero?”

“Um, that’s only a recent thing...” I told him.

“F-Forgive my impertinence...” he begged, suddenly becoming much more deferent.

“No, don’t worry about it,” I said, waving away the apology. “We need to hurry if your daughter’s being attacked.”

“A hero, though... The price required...is too much for me to pay.” His eyes seemed about to overflow with tears.

He’d come all the way from another town... This was too much.

“Mary, is there anything you can do?”

“Well, nominating silver ranks or above has a fee according to their rank. It’s a system to ensure that requests aren’t solely given to skilled adventurers and

that high-ranking adventurers can still get good equipment and lodging...”

“Maryyyy,” I whined.

“Fine, I’ll see what I can do.”

Great! We could let her deal with the adjustments.

“Can you tell me where she was attacked?” I asked the man.

“W-Well...it was a cave to the west of here...” He told me what he could, but the goblins had spooked him pretty badly, so he didn’t have much to go on.

Mary’s expression darkened. “With such vague information—”

I interrupted, though. I knew all of the caves nearby. “Did it have a low ceiling?” I asked. “Or were there two entrances? Or else a big tree nearby?”

“I think...there was one entrance, and it was rather low.”

“Got it.” I knew which one it was.

“M-Makoto, you can deduce the exact cave with such little information?” Mary asked.

“I memorized all the places that looked like they might contain goblins,” I explained.

Though, that cave had no goblins a few months ago... Had they come from the Forest of Fiends?

“I’m heading out,” I declared, marking my destination on a map for Mary. “Can you tell Lucy and Sasa where I am?”

“I will!”

With that, I rushed from the guild.

“My knight, where are you going?” Furiae called out as soon as I left.

I stopped and turned to her. “Princess? Where’re Lucy and Sasa?”

“Still sleeping,” she replied with a cute shrug.

“Right.” I could have gotten help if they were all together.

“Last night was fun. I’ve never spoken about love with girls my age before!”

Furiae gushed excitedly.

I had to cut her off though. “Sorry, I’m in a rush.” I started to run in the direction of the cave. “Wait at the guild or go meet up with the others at the inn.”

“What could you possibly mean? You are my guardian knight, are you not? I should be coming with you.”

“What?” *What did I mean? What did she mean, more like?* “I’m heading into a goblin den—it’s dangerous! I’m helping someone that’s been attacked, so wait here where it’s safe.”

“That’s an adventure... It is, isn’t it?! I’m interested!” she exclaimed. For some reason, she seemed awfully happy. Fine, then, I’d just run off and leave her behind.

“My knight, can you not run quicker?” she asked, easily keeping up with my pace. *She could run faster than me?!*

Actually, I hadn’t been able to catch her in the graveyard, had I? There was no way I could shake her... I guess she was going to run with me the whole way.

“Fine! Whatever, come with me.”

She yelped as I grabbed her hand and leaped onto the water.

Water Magic: Walk on Water, Flow.

“Oh! That is an interesting spell,” she remarked.

“I’m speeding up! Make sure you don’t bite your tongue,” I warned, accelerating suddenly.

As we skated along the waterway, it widened, transitioning into a river that took us close to the Great Forest. The trees were dense here, and the canopy grew thick enough to shade the area in gloom.

We’d walk from here.

“Princess, can you use *Stealth*?” I asked.

“Easily. When I was on the run in Highland, I *did* stay free.”

It was a reassuring answer but not a particularly priestess-y one.

We progressed quickly into the trees, our voices dropping.

“They’re only goblins,” Furiae remarked. “Do we really *need* to sneak around like this?”

“I’m the careful type.”

She offered only a “hm” in response before changing the subject. “Oh, by the way, I was talking to the mage and warrior yesterday, and...”

I zoned out a bit. She must’ve enjoyed that conversation since she wouldn’t stop talking about it. *She has no sense of gravitas...*

After a moment, I tuned back in to her monologue.

“They were competing to see who was the better kisser... It was such a pain.”

Hold on, what?

I turned toward her and saw that she was striking a goofy pose. After finishing her pantomime, she seemed slightly chagrined. “Oops, maybe I shouldn’t have said that.”

What?! I really want to know now...



“Would you tell—” I managed to ask half of my question before she interrupted me.

“Eyes up, there’s the cave.”

Damn it, don’t cut me off! I thought.

As we drew closer to the cave, I maxed out *Calm Mind*. We hid in the shadow of a tree near the entrance and inspected the opening.

“There are four goblins standing guard out front,” I whispered.

“Shall we just take them down?” asked Furiae.

“It’s too dangerous to do that near a nest.”

“It is?”

Back when I’d been flying solo, I’d tried that tactic several times—taking them all out at once seemed more efficient, but the slightest slipup would have a whole horde attacking you. There was also a chance that stronger goblins lurked within the nest. Those issues combined meant that the safest option was sneaking around like an assassin.

“The situation might be different if you’ve got strong long-range magic like Lucy...or if you’re as overpowering as Sasa in close quarters.”

I had neither of those things, so I’d have to take each goblin out one by one. It had to be now, though... The girl was under attack, and her barrier wouldn’t last forever. We couldn’t take too long to finish them off.

Hmm, what to do? I’d rushed out here, but maybe I should have joined up with Lucy and Sasa first...?

Actually...

“Princess, you’re good with curses, right?”

“I am indeed... Why?”

I had a good idea.

“Does this count as adventuring?” Furiae asked after some time.

“It does, and I won’t accept anything less.”

There was currently a deep fog surrounding the area.

Moon Magic: Curse of Slumber.

“This is convenient,” I commented.

I was holding her hand, synchronizing with her. Using water magic, I whipped up a mist, and then I pushed some moon magic out into it—the fog became a vector for the curse.

And now, the guards were all fast asleep.

“They’re not going to wake up out of nowhere, right?” I asked.

“They’ll likely sleep for the rest of the day,” Furiae replied smoothly.

This...just might work.

“Then I’ll go look for the girl. You hide over there,” I instructed, pointing.

“Such a bore.”

She probably didn’t like my roundabout method, but I was only an apprentice mage. I’d lose every time in a head-on fight with a group of goblins.

I slowly stepped inside the cave, making sure my *Stealth* and *Scout* skills were active.

The mist had worked inside as well.

I trod forward carefully, making sure not to wake the sleeping goblins. About ten of them were passed out. *Not as many as I thought*, I mused as I went farther in.

There she is!

A cage was situated in the deepest area of the cave, and a girl was locked inside it. She was surrounded by a faint hemisphere of light.

They must have just brought her here, barrier and all.

I moved closer to check on her. Though her face was blotchy from tears, I couldn’t see any injuries. Swiftly, I sliced through the bars of the cage with my dagger and then stepped toward her. The girl didn’t wake up, even when I

knocked against the barrier.

That's annoying... Furiae's curse got her as well.

With the barrier surrounding her, I couldn't carry her out on my own. There also wasn't any spell I could cast to break it. Really, I didn't expect it to work...but when I used my dagger to try and cut the barrier, my blade slipped through the magic like a hot knife through butter.

Wow!

Noah's dagger could cut through magical barriers too!

Of course it can. That shoddy spell is about as strong as paper. My dagger's got a divine cutting edge, after all.

Pardon me, then. That's a divine relic for you...no half measures.

I pulled the girl out of the split barrier before tapping her face as quietly as I could, trying to wake her up.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Wh-Wha?" she mumbled. "I passed out and... Wh-Who are you?"

"An adventurer. Your dad sent me to rescue you."

I asked her for her name—luckily, she was the right girl.

Great, mission complete. I was so relieved I'd managed to find her while the barrier was still up. Girls...didn't have much of a chance when they were attacked by goblins.

Yet, the girl's next words sent a chill down my spine.

"U-Um...there are more monsters. The goblin king left and took a group of subordinates. They could come back any time."

As soon as she finished that statement, *Sense Danger* started blaring in my mind. *Scout* started picking things up as well.

There was a mass of goblins outside the cave.

Damn it! I left Furiae outside!

She was unarmed and had no way of defending herself.

I should have brought her along!

I rushed out of the den, keeping hold of the rescued girl. I had to make it to Furiae!

When I breached the mouth of the cave, I was greeted by the goblin king and its subordinates. This was the first time I'd seen a goblin king from such proximity. It was several times taller than a normal goblin. It didn't just have brawn, though, it had brains as well. As if to underscore that fact, it was wearing armor stolen from adventurers and holding weapons in each hand. Depending on the size of the group, forces led by a goblin king could be classed as calamities.

I saw the dangerous monsters encircling Furiae and— “You filthy creatures. How dare you try to lay your hands on me!”

—her eyes glowed gold as several goblins dropped to the ground, prostrating themselves. The goblin king's head rested beneath Furiae's foot.

Huh? Uhhh...

There were so many monsters here... It'd be certain death to fight them directly.

“Princess...what's going on?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Can't you see?”

“You used *Charm* on them?” I asked after a moment of stunned pause.

She hummed smugly. “I did.”

For real?! She's incredible.

“Wow... Miss, please hold me...” Apparently, the captured girl had hearts in her eyes as well. Furiae was captivating them all, woman and monster alike...

“Makoto, are you okay?!”

“Takatsuki, there's a swarm of gob— Wait, what?”

Lucy and Sasa had suddenly rushed in, only to stare wide-eyed at the sight of Furiae stepping on a goblin king.

“Meteo Rain!” Lucy yelled, and her fire blast destroyed the goblins and their

nest in one blow.

Now that the tension had passed, the rescued girl seemed to have passed out, so I got Sasa to carry her. It kinda felt like only the girls had really done anything in our party.

On the way back, I spoke to Furiae.

“Hey, Princess? Could you teach me *Charm*?”

It was almost like a bonus skill that let her control those goblins... I wanted to learn it. And I had the ability now—the “gift” skill I’d gotten from Naya for becoming her guardian knight was *Charm*.

Furiae wasn’t entirely receptive, though. “My knight... Are you planning on using *Charm* to make girls fall for you?”

“I wouldn’t do that!” I protested, but I guess that *was* what people would assume I wanted...

“Makoto?”

“Takatsuki?”

The other two girls were both looking suspiciously at me.

Seriously, I wouldn’t do that!

“You want every tool you can to fight against monsters, right?” I asked. “Then teach me so I can be of service.”

“Hm.” Furiae pondered. “Well, okay.”

Great! Now I can get her to teach me some moon magic at the same time.

When we returned to the guild, the man thanked me like I was a god.

Since I’d technically been the one commissioned, Mary had dropped the massive price tag as I’d requested. Though, to be honest, I’d barely done anything.

A little while later, Furiae was teaching me how to use *Charm*. I’d only used *Water Magic* skills thus far, so I was enjoying learning another skill.

It was pretty difficult, though. My power was weak, and I was testing it out on Sasa and Lucy.

“Feel anything?” I asked.

“Not at all...”

No effect... Seems like it'll take a lot of training before I can use it on people...

Elementals, elementals, I called out, trying *Charm* on them, but they didn't react well. Undyne hadn't appeared since Highland.

I could almost affect animals—I'd gathered a collection of local cats and dogs around me. It *was* cute...but was collecting pets useful for combat?

Was this just another miss?

During the time we spent in Macallan, Furiae gained a zest for adventuring, so we often went to hunt monsters with Sasa and Lucy. There were more monsters around as of late, so even the most basic quests were important jobs for us adventurers. We spent most afternoons doing fairly low-difficulty tasks, and in the evenings, we feasted with the other adventurers.

We passed several days like that, and though it wasn't anything special, Furiae seemed to enjoy it. Fujiyan was busy getting ready for the succession conference, so I hadn't seen him.

This morning when I woke up, I saw a lot of people milling around the guild's entrance. *Things are bustling*, I thought.

“Look over there,” someone said.

“She's gorgeous...”

“I've never seen her from so close-up...”

“The princess carved of ice...”

“Why is she here?”

Apparently, a bigwig was visiting the guild.

Hm, I can't see through the crowds.

I bobbed over toward the mass of people.

“Hero!” I heard a familiar voice call out. “Are you here?”

That was definitely Sophia’s guardian knight geezer. Which meant...

“Hero Makoto.”

Princess Sophia stood in front of me wearing a refined smile.

Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki's Old Haunts

◇ The Provincial Lord's Daughter Christina's Perspective ◇

We were in an office at the estate. “We,” in this instance, included both myself and my younger sister, Constance Macallan.

“Chris, will you stop this pointless struggling?” she asked. “Violet and I have the backing of almost everyone of influence in Macallan.”

I let out a noise of discontent. As much as I hated to admit it, her assured smile and statement were correct. In the brief time we had been away from Macallan, the allies Sir Fujiwara had gathered had become turncoats.

To think that the situation could change so drastically...

“The Benriach family also supports me,” she continued. “Your Lord Fujiwara is no comparison, is he?”

The man behind her must have been an envoy from the Benriach family.

She'd prepared well, but I knew why—she wanted to become the lady of the region to have an even more luxurious life. I knew my sister, and I knew that she'd just take the title and build her own finances without any intention of developing the region. She was just feigning her devotion to that lie in order to convince our father.

Constance inheriting the title would be of no benefit to the people of Macallan.

I'm at a considerable disadvantage now though...

I had worked with Sir Fujiwara to develop the airship in hopes that doing so would catalyze a golden age for Macallan. We had formed strong ties with the capital, but our foundations here were— My thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Excuse my interruption, please.” My future husband entered, looking slightly hesitant.

“What is it, Sir Fujiwara?” I asked.

“What?” Constance scowled. “We are in the middle of a meeting.”

I was rather offended by how she spoke to him. After all, he *was* my fiancé.

He didn’t pay any attention to that, though—immediately, he started speaking again, offering only the essential information.

“Princess Sophia has arrived.”

Both Constance and I let out gasps of shock, but my sister’s mouth was hanging agape.

She soon corrected herself. “I will greet her at once!” she declared.

It was rare for the first princess to visit a distant province like ours.

“That would be ill-advised, Lady Constance,” Sir Fujiwara told her.

“How could you say that, Lord Fujiwara?! Kindly remove yourself,” she ordered shrilly. Of course she would immediately try to rebuke him.

However, he kept calm.

“Princess Sophia has already given her orders—Lady Christina and I will guide her around the town.”

“Th-That’s impossible! Why would she ask a new noble like you rather than the lord of the land?!”

Constance was hysterical, but I had some idea of what was going on.

“Has she come to see Sir Makoto?” I asked.

“Indeed... She headed immediately for the guild,” he answered with a reluctant smile.

I hadn’t thought that she was *so* taken with him.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?” stammered Constance. “Hero Makoto is the new State-Authorized Hero, is he not? He has no accomplishments to his name.”

That was only true as far as Macallan was concerned... Sir Makoto’s victory in Horn had been officially glossed over, and the reports stated that Prince

Leonardo had taken care of the issue. News of the incident in Highland also wouldn't have reached Macallan yet.

"Constance, I am going to greet Her Highness. We will continue this discussion at another time."

"But..." Her earlier composure had vanished, and she was now just standing there with a lost look on her face. The Benriach envoy seemed utterly discombobulated as well.

For my part, though, I accompanied Sir Fujiwara to the adventurer's guild.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"Princess Sophia?" I asked.

"Hero Makoto," she replied with a smile. "Are you well?"

"More or less..." I answered vaguely. I mean, we'd seen each other on a daily basis until fairly recently.

"Wow," I heard from the crowd. "He's talking with Lady Sophia."

"He really is a hero..."

"That lucky swine..."

"He seems to know the commander of the Saintwater Knights as well."

"What is he, our best...?"

The adventurers were all in a tizzy. The Saintwater Knights, by the way, were apparently the geezer's knight order. That name felt a bit too cool to my ears.

"Y-Your Highness Princess Sophia," sputtered a scarred man. "What business do you have with a guild in a small town such as this?"

That man was...the head of the guild, right? I'd only ever seen him from a distance.

"I am inspecting the town that Hero Makoto is based out of," she answered. "You need not make a production. Would you guide me to his house first?"

The guild leader, Mary, and I all stared quizzically at her.

My...house?

“I don’t have a house,” I answered awkwardly.

“What do you mean?”

“I sleep in the guild rest area.”

Princess Sophia stared dubiously at me.

It’s normal for adventurers to sleep here though...

“Who is his contact?”

“I don’t ha—”

“I-I am!” Mary interrupted me.

“You’re my...contact?” I asked her quietly.

“It’ll end up the guild leader’s responsibility otherwise, so go with it,” she whispered into my ear.

Her breath tickled my cheek, and Princess Sophia’s gaze sharpened.

“What is your name?”

“Mary Gold of the Macallan Adventurer’s Guild!” she answered, coming to attention.

“Guild leader, Mary—bed and board for heroes is completely covered by the royal family. Why, then, is Hero Makoto sleeping in the guild hall? Are you aware of the rules governing State-Authorized Heroes?”

“I am, Your Highness...”

“I-I am...”

Princess Sophia’s voice was audible across the whole area. The guild employees all looked awkwardly away.

“Then it would seem that you do not know how to follow them.”

The guild employees and the adventurers all paled. They probably thought the royal family was about to impose sanctions.

It’s because she always puts everything so harshly...

The time I’d spent with her in Horn and Symphonia had helped me start to

understand her. She was simply serious, not scary. I'd had the same misunderstanding when we'd first met, though.

"Princess Sophia," I interjected. "We've spent the last few days celebrating my new position as a hero. We haven't had time to look for a house yet."

It was the truth—there'd been parties every night. Well, the parties hadn't really had anything to do with me...but still.

"Is that so?" she asked. The guild workers all nodded hurriedly. "Very well then."

The guild leader and Mary looked visibly relieved.

At that moment, a pair of familiar faces made their way inside.

"Princess Sophia, I hope you are well," said my former classmate. He was accompanied by his fiancée.

"Fujiyan and Chris?" I muttered. It was rare that they ever came to the guild.

"I have the perfect property for our esteemed Tackie," Fujiyan declared. "It is an estate with a guest room suitable for royalty."

"I see... That would be acceptable." Princess Sophia nodded.

A house for me? I'd be fine with a studio apartment, so where'd all this stuff about estates come from?

I peered at my friend's face, and his expression told me to leave it to him. He must've had some kind of plan, so I went along with it.

Before I knew what was happening, an estate close to the town center with a big garden was ready for me.

This place is massive...

The house was rented by the royal family, so I didn't know what the cost was, but I was scared to find out.

"What a big house," Lucy gushed.

"That's incredible, Takatsuki."

“It would appear that ‘hero’ is a luxurious position.”

Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae all found out after the fact, but they seemed to approve. They had all picked out their choice of rooms in the estate. Personally, I chose the room closest to the entrance so I could make hasty exits.

After everything had been arranged, Princess Sophia came up to me. “Hero Makoto, I would prefer to stay and talk further...” Her voice seemed somewhat regretful. I’d assumed that she’d be staying in Macallan for a while, but she was apparently heading for the next town.

Recently, monsters had been more active, and there were a lot of casualties close to the Forest of Fiends. The girl we’d saved from goblins the other day was a prime example of that, so Princess Sophia was inspecting the other towns in the area.

She was a hard worker, huh?

“Take care,” I told her.

“Once the inspections are complete, I will be returning. Do not leave on a journey before then,” she stressed.

I was a State-Authorized Hero, and it was a post I was effectively employed in. Since she was my employer, her statement was like a boss giving an order.

And I’d actually been planning a trip...

“I’ll wait in Macallan,” I assured her.

“Then it is a promise, Hero Makoto,” she replied, gripping my hand.

My heart raced a bit as I answered. “R-Right.”

After that, the Saintwater Knights, led by Princess Sophia and the geezer, left Macallan.

That night, Fujiyan invited us to dinner. Chris had beaten out her sisters—she’d inherited the Macallan family title.

“It is thanks to you, my esteemed Tackie!”

“Let me pour you a drink, Sir Makoto.”

“Eat whatever you like’h.”

Fujiyan, Chris, and Nina were all weirdly grateful, but I hadn’t done anything.

“Did you not call for Princess Sophia?”

“Nope, I didn’t...”

The princess had just turned up, and I’d been similarly shocked to see her.

“Regardless, the details are hardly important.”

“Hmmm.”

Though I didn’t know what’d really happened, they sure did treat me to a nice night out.

I was free the next day (and every day until the princess got back), so I went hunting in the area around Macallan. Sometimes I went solo, other times I partied up. This time, I was alone.

I ran into Jean and Emily on my way back.

“Hey, Jean. Been out adventuring?” I asked.

“Oh, Makoto. You soloing today?”

“Good to see you, Makoto,” Emily added before turning to Jean. “I’m going to head back now.”

The two of them had apparently been hunting ogres nearby. Emily rushed off while Jean and I caught up with each other and shot the breeze.

“Say, Makoto,” Jean said eventually. His expression suddenly turned serious.

“Hm?”

“I’m actually...going to marry Emily.”

“What?”

That’d come out of nowhere. They were getting *married*? But we were only teenagers... Still, they *were* childhood friends, so they’d been together for a long time.

“It’s thanks to you,” he added. “We heard that you helped out the orphanage

in Symphonia that raised us.”

He was looking intensely at me. *I mean...it just kind of happened...*

“Most of the money we’ve made as adventurers has gone back to them. But recently, they got in touch and told us that they’d be fine thanks to you. Now we can use our money for ourselves. Thank you so much!”

“Hm...right.” I’d just asked Peter and the Castor family for a favor. Since Sasa had been worried about the orphans, the idea had just come to me.

“We owe you,” he insisted.

“You’re welcome,” I managed to reply eventually. My smile must’ve looked uncomfortable, but he kept thanking me.

After that, we met up with Emily and Lucy back at the guild. The two girls were eating. Emily must have told Lucy about their news too, and we had a private celebration for them.

It seemed like everyone was settling down now... Jean and Emily were getting married, and Fujiyan and Sakurai were doing the same.

I was still a bachelor. It didn’t really matter, but...I felt kinda awkward.

Recently, every time I’d gone to the guild, the single women there had come around to talk with me. It was nice to be popular...but not so easy when you were as shy as me. Because of that, I gradually stopped visiting the guild as much.

I was currently practicing my magic in the canal behind my house.

“Nrow, nrow,” a black cat mewed as it trotted up.

“You again?” I asked.

My *Charm* training hadn’t shown any effect on people or elementals, but it did let me call cats and dogs together.

This cat—and *only* this cat—kept turning up even after I dropped *Charm*.

“Nrow, nrow.”

It was a slightly underweight cat, somewhere in between being a kitten and

an adult. It rubbed its head against me. Cute.

“Wait a minute,” I said, dipping my hand into the water.

Water Magic: Flow.

Using my magic, I caught a fish and hoisted it from the canal. It flopped down in front of the cat, who meowed excitedly, inspected its surroundings, and then dug in.

It could have eaten the fish slower, but once it was finished, the cat let out a satisfied huff before curling up near me and sleeping.

The old “eat, sleep, repeat...” Not a bad life it had. I ran a hand along its back as I got lost in thought.

What do I do now...?

Since I’d become a hero, my name had grown in value. I was worth something now and was treated like a VIP.

And what about my party members? Sasa had been strong to begin with, and Lucy had gotten so much better during her training with the Grandsage. I’d been worried about Furiae, but the goblin hunt the other day proved that there was nothing to worry about.

And underneath it all lurks Eir’s prophecy...

The fall of Roses. Hardly pleasant...far from it, even.

I heard the cat start to purr. Things were peaceful for now, at least.

But what was going to happen? The Great Demon Lord would come back eventually. I needed to get stronger.

What should I start with...?

I couldn’t tell the future.

Maybe I could look at things differently—Fujiyan’s wife had been putting her all into inheriting Macallan’s title, and an adventurer from my generation—Jean—was getting married.

Maybe I should think about what I want to do with my future...

Lucy, Sasa, and Sophia...were all making romantic moves on me. Furiae...wasn't quite. She and I had a business relationship.

"What should I do?" I asked the cat.

"Mrow?" Instead of providing an answer, it sounded more like it was asking me why I'd interrupted its nap.

Who caught that fish for you? I thought. This *was* another world... The least it could do was talk with me.

But in the end, I just kept disrupting its sleep.

"Makoto, what are you doing?"

"Lucy?"

The girl in question was standing there wearing a pink dress and red cardigan. Since improving her mana control, it seemed like she'd been able to control her body temperature better. Or, at least, she was wearing more reserved clothing these days.

I used to need *Calm Mind* to even look her way. This wasn't a problem anymore...which was kind of sad.

"I'm training," I told her.

"By playing with a cat?"

"I'm training *and* playing with a cat."

"That cat's been in your garden all the time lately. Is it your pet?"

"No, just a stray. Need something, then?"

She hummed in thought for a while, then gave me a bashful look.

Her next words seemed almost planned. "Hey, Makoto, would you come out with me for a bit?"

◇ Lucy's Perspective ◇

It happened when I was young.

"Hey, mom? How did you and dad get together?"

Mom had been wandering the world for a year, so I hadn't seen her for a

while. Dad was off somewhere else—I'd heard that he was demon nobility of some kind, and immensely strong. But...why had mom—an elf mage—married a demon in the first place? That's what I wanted to know.

She answered my inquiry with a chuckle. "Well, that takes me back! I had a fateful meeting with your dad while I was traveling." She had a faraway look in her eyes. "His scarlet hair seemed to practically *burn* and his body was like tempered steel. He was a beautiful man. As soon as we met, I knew he was the one for me, so I went right on the offensive!"

"You're so passionate!" I exclaimed.

"Right?! He was a wonderful person too. However, since he was part of the nobility, I had a lot of rivals."

So dad was a popular demon with the ladies...

"Romance with demons is simple though," mom explained. "The strongest wins!"

"What?" I hadn't expected the conversation to go this way.

"Well, I *am* the strongest mage, right?"

"R-Right..." At least in Springrogue, I didn't know of a more skilled mage—mom was even more powerful than our hero or the priestess. But...what did her strength have to do with romance?

"I beat every single one of my rivals. The last woman was a high-class demon, and she was strong."

"Wh-What happened?" I asked.

"Hm? Well, we fought. But even after a hundred bouts, I never managed a decisive win."

I was shocked. "A-A hundred?"

"I burnt her to a crisp a few times. High-class demons have several lives, though, so she kept coming back. Well, to be fair, she killed me a bunch as well, but my automatic revival brought me back."

I was aghast. *I-Is getting married really that hard?!*

“In the end, we both realized the answer—if we couldn’t reach a conclusion, then we could both marry him.”

“Wha?”

“So, we both proposed and went after him. Pretty vigorously as well,” mom said with a cute wink. It was...rather extreme.

“B-By the way,” I asked, “what kind of demon was his other wife?”

“Um, I think she was a succubus queen? Even I can admit that she was sexy.”

“R-Right...” A succubus queen? So...Demon Queen Lilith in the underworld?

No, no way... That couldn’t be true.

“So, where’s dad?” I’d lost count of how many times I’d asked her this question.

But she responded the same way she did every time. “Hm, your dad’s faaar away in a bit of a risky place. I’ll take you to see him when you’re stronger.”

She was treating me like a kid!

“I already know!” I exclaimed. “He’s on the northern continent, the demon continent!” Demons lived on the demon continent—that’s what I’d learned at school.

“Lucy, all the demons on that continent are barbarians. Your dad would never be caught dead there.”

“H-He wouldn’t?”

Mom had a distinctly unhappy look on her face for a moment, but it soon changed back into a sparkling smile. “I’m sure you’ll be a wonderful mage in ten years or so. I’ll take you to see him then.”

Ten years?

“Maybe I’ll fall in love by then...” I mused.

“I’m sure you’ll meet a wonderful boy. After all, you’re my daughter,” she said firmly, putting her hand on my head. “Love is war! If you fall in love, go completely on the attack! You need to get him away from other people and move in close to him. If you can, make sure that your clothes show off a lot of

skin...”

I could tell that she was enjoying herself quite a bit as she spoke. Even now, I could remember that mother-daughter talk.

Grandpa got really mad at her after that, I think.

It was so nostalgic to think of. I didn’t understand it at the time, but now...I knew. Mom didn’t have much common sense, but she was right—once I fell in love, I had to act. I couldn’t just wait.

My thoughts soon shifted away from my childhood and onto more recent memories.

“A bunch of women I don’t know keep talking to me at the guild now...” Makoto complained. He was collapsed bonelessly on his sofa. “It’s really tough.”

He was shy, so he didn’t enjoy conversations with new people. Honestly, he found them to be more of a chore than anything.

Don’t you realize? That’s because they want you.

But, he certainly didn’t seem like he understood their intentions...

One time, I’d overheard a conversation between two women at the guild.

“Hey, I’m going to confess to Makoto!”

“What? Doesn’t he have Lucy and Aya in his party?”

“Hmm, well, they *look* like they’re together, but apparently, their relationship isn’t that close yet.”

“What?! They haven’t *done* it yet?”

“Yup. Lucy dresses like that, but she’s all innocent really.”

“This is our chance. I’m going to go for it.”

“Me too. Here’s to an easy ride with the hero!”

These women used to mock him by calling him the Goblin Cleaner! I’d thought.

“Let’s have a drink and invite him!”

“He can’t hold his drink, so he’ll fall asleep right away.”

“Then, when he’s drunk...”

This is bad, I’d thought. Female adventurers were all assertive, but many didn’t want to be adventurers all their lives. These types of women looked to marry men with good prospects so they could retire from adventuring and live off their husband’s wealth.

And since Makoto was a new hero and single, he was an enticing catch. To put it the same way as Aya, he was a tempting target for a gold digger.

That’s why I called out to Makoto when I saw him playing with the cat in his garden.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“C’mon, this way,” Lucy beckoned.

We’d traveled into the Great Forest. It’d been a while since we’d come here, and we were venturing deeper and deeper into the trees.

“We shouldn’t go too far,” I cautioned. “It’s risky.”

“Don’t worry,” she answered without turning around. “My *Listen* skill will let me hear danger from miles away.”

Well, I guess that was fine. But why did she want to go into the Great Forest at all?

Oh, there’s a big monster up ahead, I realized, alerted by my *Scout* skill. Of course, Lucy had noticed it as well. She came to a halt and readied her staff.

Heavy footfalls shook the earth, and then three big ogres stomped out in front of us.

“Lucy!” I yelled, readying my dagger and preparing my elemental magic.

But she simply raised her staff. “It’s okay, leave it to me. *Fire Magic: Firestorm*.”

She’d cast a high rank spell without an incantation, and her flames immediately engulfed the three monsters. They screeched out their dying breaths and then fell, unmoving, to the forest floor.

Huh, that was over in no time. Honestly, I hadn’t contributed at all. I stared

blankly at the charred corpses of the ogres, then replaced my dagger in its sheath.

I turned to Lucy. "Well done." She was staring back at me with an intense expression.

"Makoto...do you remember? This is where that big ogre attacked me."

"Oh? It is?"

"Yup. It's the place where you saved me. I'll never forget it."

The Great Forest all looked the same to me, just an endless sea of green, so it was hard for me to differentiate specific places. But Lucy was an elf who'd been brought up in the forest, so that was probably why she could keep track of it.

"You were so cool back then!" she exclaimed.

"I-I was?" I asked, my voice tinged with embarrassment.

"We adventured together after that, but I failed every spell... Even so, you didn't abandon me."

"Well, yeah." It's not like I'd had any other prospective party members.

"Then," she continued, "when you were burned during the griffin fight, you told me that you needed me."

"Yeah, I did." That sounded like something I might've said to try and cheer her up.

Oh, you don't remember? I heard Noah wheedle. *Well, you're just the woorst.*

I do remember, Noah... More or less.

Such a bad man.

As I was speaking with Noah, Lucy closed the distance between us.

"I realized, though, that you only said that because you're kind. You could have coped on your own, right?"

"That's...not true. You've been a lot of help."

"No," she countered. "You managed on your own when you defeated the

monsters in Labyrinthos, and the blight giant in Horn, and when we were in Symphonia as well. I think you would've become a hero even if I hadn't been there."

"You're overselling me," I said, chuckling ruefully. That was the only thing I could muster up in response to her excessive praise.

"So...I wanted to catch up with you. That's why I trained with the Grandsage. It was because I wanted you to say that you needed me...and mean it."

Why is she telling me this stuff after all we've been through? I've needed her for a long time now.

As that thought was passing through my mind, she put a hand behind my back.

"Makoto," she said, looking me straight in the eyes.

"Y-Yes, what is it, Lucy?"

"I'm strong now. I don't know whether I can stand as a hero's companion, but I won't be a hindrance like I used to be."

"You are strong, yeah," I agreed.

"Really? I'm helpful?"

"Of course you are. You're a lifesaver."

"I'm so glad," she said, pausing a moment. "Then, I want a reward."

"A reward?"

She came closer until her pretty face was right in front of my own. Our toes were touching. She smiled meaningfully before standing on her tiptoes...and pressing her lips into mine.

The sensation of her soft lips and hot breath blossomed across my skin. Her hands joined behind my back and she pulled herself into me. It was the second time we'd kissed.

Well, if we're doing this, then I should... Carefully, I wrapped my own hands behind her back, embracing her and closing my eyes.

And so, we held each other in the dappled gloom of the Great Forest.

A good half a minute of kissing passed, and just when I was thinking that it would end, she put her weight onto me, and I fell softly back onto the forest floor. She straddled my lap, then fumbled at the buttons of my shirt, undoing them.

“Did you know?” she asked. “There’s a legend in elven culture—if you have your first time in the forest, you’ll be with your lover for life.”

“O-Oh...” No, I hadn’t known that...

Wait...? Hang on?!

The forest was quiet, and there was no one around but us. While I was dazed, her fingers made their way along my body.

“Makoto...mmm.”

“Mhm.”

She stole my lips again. Unlike last time, I couldn’t even close my eyes. Lucy and I were the same, both flushed with arousal, and I could feel her body temperature climbing.

My belt fell to the ground with a clatter.

“L-Lucy...”

“Don’t worry...leave it to me.”



Once she'd spoken, she carried on with the kissing. I was trying to figure out how to respond, but suddenly, I saw a small red light floating in the corner of my eye.

I'd never seen it before...but I'd seen similar things.

An elemental? I wondered. *But if it's red, it must be a fire elemental...*

I recalled the last time Lucy and I had kissed... I was sure I'd seen the same kind of thing. So, kissing Lucy let me see fire elementals?

"Makoto...do you not want to?" she asked.

I must have drifted away because Lucy was looking at me, her eyes filled with worry.

"That's not it," I replied. I put the light out of my mind and strengthened my hold on her.

As I placed my hand on her exposed chest, she let out an adorable mewl. Her scarlet face and look of suppressed embarrassment were all gorgeous.

Go! Become a man, Makoto! Go for it!

It would've been even better if Noah wasn't watching... I ignored the peeping, eavesdropping goddess and focused my attention back on Lucy.

But just then, there was a roar.

Out of nowhere, a big ogre lunged from where it must've been lurking among the trees. For just a moment, I contemplated what to do, but then, I decided to try using the fire elemental.

Lucy had stiffened. I held my hand out toward the ogre.

"Fire Magic: Fire Lance."

A blast of fire in the shape of a spear burst forth from my hand and pierced the big ogre. It didn't even have a chance to scream before it was reduced to cinders.

Th-That's insane!

"M-Makoto," Lucy stammered, seeming dazed, "did you just use a *Fire Magic*

spell?”

“It’s dangerous here,” I said, not exactly answering. “Shall we head back to town?”

“Y-Yeah...”

We dressed ourselves and then hurried to Macallan.

“Makoto and I got really close in the Great Forest today!” Lucy announced to the other female adventurers at the guild bar. They all cried out in response.

Well, it’s not like we went all the way... Plus, Lucy, that’s embarrassing. I wished she wouldn’t go and tell everyone.

Mary and Sasa both eagerly crowded around me.

“Really, Makoto?!”

“Takatsuki, tell me everything!”

Furiae, on the other hand, was looking coldly at me.

“So you weren’t adventuring. You were doing...that?”

Well, that was just how things had gone... Either way, I ended up needing to explain everything over dinner.

That night, when I began my usual training, I remembered what had happened earlier.

When Lucy kissed me, I saw fire elementals...

How exactly did that work? I’d need to ask Noah about it later.

Before I knew it, I’d fallen asleep, those thoughts still on my mind.

◇ Aya Sasaki’s Perspective ◇

It happened in the third year of junior high.

We were currently studying in a burger shop. Takatsuki had been doing math problems for the past little while.

“Takatsuki?” I called out.

“Hm?” he replied, glancing up from the book. He could concentrate for hours if I left him alone. It was honestly impressive... “What’s up, Sasa?”

“Should we take a break?”

“Yeah, may as well.”

Unlike him, my concentration had run out quite a while ago, but I’d stayed here because I hadn’t wanted to disturb him.

Two whole hours without speaking... If he’d been one of the girls, he’d have been talking within ten minutes.

Takatsuki bought a (vanilla) McShake, probably because he wanted something sweet. Maybe I did too.

“Give me a sip,” I requested.

“Huh? Sure,” he replied. I took the cup and sucked on the straw.

So sweet! This is great.

I noticed that Takatsuki had reddened slightly.

Oh, because of the indirect kiss... Well, whatever. It wasn’t anything new. I’d buy him a salty snack later to make up for it.

I was bored of studying, so I struck up a conversation. The topic wandered all over the place for a while, but then, I had a sudden thought.

“Hey, why do you want to go to East Shinagawa High?” I asked him.

“Well, it’s where you’re going, right?”

“What?” *He wanted to go to the same school as me?*

“School is better when you’re with a friend, right?” After he spoke, he looked away in embarrassment.

“Ah...yeah.”

O-Oh...he wanted to be with me.

That made me kinda happy.

I don’t remember when I first started to have feelings for Takatsuki...but it was probably during those exams that I was most aware of him. I’d prop my

chin up on my hand, complain about how studying was boring, and watch him read reference books for hours.

It turned out that we both got into the same school and even ended up in the same class.

When he became close to Fujiwara, I was a bit jealous. Regardless, it was a good thing that he had friends besides me. Gradually, the three of us started to hang out, though Takatsuki and I spent time together still, just the two of us.

It was nearing Christmas, and I'd just decided to confess my feelings to him. But then, it happened—I died and reincarnated as a lamia in another world.

I'd been reborn in a pitch-black dungeon. Creepy bugs crawled all over the cold stone, and that was my bed. I had nothing to wear. There wasn't much food, and in order to survive, I had to eat whatever I could get my hands on.

Considering my upbringing in Japan, it was a painful environment to live in. The days were hard and lonely, and I was pathetic.

At first, I did nothing but cry.

Oh, god, why did this happen to me?

Wherever I went, there were only monsters. Well, there *were* humans. They were called adventurers in this world, and they were enemies of monsters...monsters who saw them only as food. And I was a lamia, a monster that ate humans...a freak.

The one silver lining was that I wasn't alone—I had my sisters and mother. Eventually, I even got used to hunting, and I started to love my family.

But then...they all died.

It's the worst, the worst, the worst! Whywhywhywhywhy?! Why did this happen?! If only I didn't remember my old world! I don't need these memories! If only I could've lived as a monster from the start...

I had those thoughts hundreds of times. It was harsh...and painful.

Being able to remember the fun I'd had in my old life made my existence in the dungeon seem even more desolate. I wanted to believe that it was a dream, that I'd wake up back in Japan. And yet, every time I opened my eyes to see the

grim dungeon around me, I grew more and more depressed.

The only reason I didn't end it all was because I wanted vengeance for my family.

If I'd stayed there, I would've lost my mind, would've gone insane, gotten revenge, and then lost the will to live. I would've slipped away in the night...

But...I met Takatsuki again.

He rescued me. And he didn't even care that I was a monster.

His lifestyle as an adventurer had calmed him down a bit, and he'd gotten kinda cool! He was still the same old Takatsuki though...the boy I loved.

And he'd saved me. He'd asked me to come with him.

Compared to the hell of living alone in the dungeon, life in Macallan was practically a shining jewel. I just wanted to be with him. That was all, nothing else—I just wanted Takatsuki. I...didn't want to be alone anymore.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

Mmm...what's so heavy? I wondered as I stirred awake.

I felt something touching my face, and I tried to brush it off, cracking my eyes open as I did. A pair of eyes met mine, lit by the faint light from the moon and a lamp.

A cat? No, they were bigger.

Sasa was on top of me...and her hair was tickling my face.

I glanced around. It was my room all right—nothing else was out of place, and I was on my bed.

"U-Um, Sasa...what are you doing?"

"I came to hang out," she said with a teasing grin. It was an expression I'd seen on my friend's face countless times since junior high, so I knew...

It definitely spelled trouble!

Uh, Sasa?

The room was dark, so there was barely any light reflected in her gaze. She

smiled cutely with those dark eyes.

Honestly...I was kinda scared.

“S-So what brings you here at this time of night?”

“Night crawling of course, Takatsuki! ≡”

Night— Wait. That night crawling?! What had brought this on? Was it because of Lucy?

“You know I can’t get up with you on top of me,” I said. “Mind moving over?”

She had her elbows braced on either side of my head and her face was hovering right above mine. I was locked in place.

“Takatsuki...” She didn’t move, and our faces were so close that our noses touched. “You haven’t done it with Lucy yet, have you?”

“Oh...you’re talking about what Lucy said at dinner? No, we didn’t—we were interrupted.”

“I see.” Sasa chuckled before turning serious. “You know, I’ve liked you since our third year in junior high.”

“Sasa...”

“Though, to you, I guess I was just a friend that happened to be a girl...” Her voice sounded sad, and she looked away.

“Eh?” So...she wanted to know what I thought of her...? “I’ve felt the same way since fall of our first year.” If anything, I’d liked her for longer than she’d liked me.

There was a long pause.

“What? S-So you’ve had feelings for me since...right after we met?”

“Honestly, pretty much since you first came to my house to hang out.” I’d been very conscious of her, considering that she was the first girl that’d ever come over to my place.

“Th-That was all it took?” she asked, flabbergasted.

I mean, I’d been a simple creature in junior high...

“You came over when my parents were out, all on your own...that was a pretty big thing to me.” Plus, she’d been all too happy to roll around on my bed, and I’d seen right up her skirt. I hadn’t been able to sleep in my bed that night... I could just smell her.

“What? Whaaat?! H-Hang on!”

She pressed her hands into her flustered cheeks. “S-So, since our third year...our feelings have been mutual?”

“Seems that way,” I replied.

I hadn’t known that she felt anything for me. She was fairly popular with the other boys, so I’d given up on her going out with someone like me.

“N-No way... S-So... Uh... Wh-What about now?”

My friend’s familiar, slightly round face peered at me. She had a bit of a baby face and looked almost like a friendly hamster. The strange over-awareness I’d felt around her since junior high resurfaced, but I had *Calm Mind* now, so I could at least act more relaxed.

“I feel the same way.”

At that, she let out a deep sigh, collapsing next to me on the bed.

“And I was so nervous to tell you how I felt...”

“You were?”

“I was!” she exclaimed, shooting angrily up. “I heard you’d gotten close to Lu, and I didn’t know what I’d do...! You really haven’t gone all the way with her?”

I paused for a moment. “Come on...” She didn’t need to keep bringing it up. “I didn’t,” I admitted after a moment.

Sasa let out a smug noise. “Right. By the way, I’ve got something I want to ask of you.”

“If it’s something I can do, then I will,” I agreed hesitantly. My heart was throbbing in my chest as I waited.

“I want a family, Takatsuki...”

“A family?” I didn’t get what she meant.

She looked at me bashfully before bringing her face close again. Her breath ghosted against my ear as she whispered.

“I want your children.”

“Bwuh?! S-Sasa... Wait a—”

“Nope, no waiting.”

She put a chill hand on my cheek before she brought her lips down to touch mine. Her body was on top of me, and I couldn't escape.

She stripped my shirt off. “Come on...undress me...” she murmured.

I groaned and raised my hand to her top, my fingers undoing the buttons that held it closed.

Our lips overlapped again.

I...was *with* Sasa...the girl I'd wanted for so long...

“Huh? Takatsuki? You're breathing heavily.” She grinned challengingly.

I didn't answer, just held her naked body close. She responded in kind, holding me tightly. Our heavy breaths were the only sound in the room as we gazed into each other's eyes.

“Let's do it...” she whispered.

“Sasa...”

No more words were needed. We just held each other and— “Aya! Hold up!” Lucy burst in without knocking.

“No getting in the way, Lu,” Sasa pouted.

“L-Lucy? You heard?”

“The window's open—of course I heard!”

The window was indeed open. Still, Sasa didn't seem to care. “Let's just carry on,” she said to me.

“Wh-What are you planning, Aya?!” exclaimed Lucy.

“Trying for a kid.”

“Tr—” Lucy couldn’t finish the phrase.

Sasa, you didn’t need to put it like that...

“Then I should be with you as well!” In an instant, Lucy had whipped her top off and climbed onto the bed.

Both of them?!

Lucy gave Sasa a sidelong glare, which was returned in kind.

A-Am I going to die here?! I thought, but it didn’t develop into a fight.

“Takatsuki...”

“Makoto...”

They both crawled toward me, their eyes heated.

“Sasa, Lucy, calm down and—”

“Not happening.”

“Nope. ≡”

They ignored me and pushed me back. I didn’t have the strength to resist.

Today’s the day I become an adult...

But suddenly, I heard a yell from a voice I recognized.

“Keep it down!” Furiae roared angrily. “Sleep until morning! *Curse of Slumber!*”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, I felt a wave of irresistible exhaustion. Just before I closed my eyes, I managed to glimpse Sasa and Lucy sleeping at my side.

Wow, she got them both too... Lucy and Sasa were powerful in their own rights, and I’d kinda had this image of strong characters resisting debuffs. Well, I guess that’s the priestess of curses for you.

I lost consciousness.

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with His Goddess

“Morning, lady-killer.”

I awoke to Noah standing in front of me. As I went to greet her, I noticed another woman by her side. This woman had an affectionate smile, hair of pure gold, and was wearing a blue dress. Altogether, she gave off a holy air.

“Hi, Mako,” she said, waving at me like I was an old friend.

It was the second...or more accurately, the *third* time we’d met. However, I had often seen her visage while traveling around Roses—in the Water Temple, Macallan, Horn, and practically everywhere else in the country, there were statues of her. There were so many, in fact, that one could easily say it was impossible *not* to know what she looked like. Her name was revered by all that called Roses home.

“Eir...” I murmured. She was one of the Sacred Deities that ruled the world.

Why was she *here*?

“That’s right, Mako!” she exclaimed with a smile, her eyes shining gold.

The sparkle in her gaze was so beautiful it seemed to pull my soul toward it. I felt like I’d be enchanted if I didn’t manage to avert my gaze from hers. *So...is that Charm Eyes, Eir?*

“Stop it!” Noah yelled, hitting Eir on the head.

“Owww. So *Charm* really doesn’t work on Mako,” Eir said brazenly, even as she rubbed her head.

“You can’t let your guard down around her, Makoto. No getting *Charmed* by anyone but me, got it?”

“I mean, you haven’t done it either.” It wasn’t like I was planning on leaving Noah for another goddess though.

“Noah?!” Upon hearing our conversation, Eir’s expression looked startled. “You’re showing Mako your true form?”

“Yup, what of it?”

Eir seemed dazed by that response. “We might be in a dream, but keeping his sanity while directly seeing a goddess is...”

“What do you mean?” I asked, suddenly concerned at the mention of my sanity.

“Normal people can’t look directly at a god,” Eir explained. “The levels we exist on are too dissimilar to a human’s and your brain’ll just pop. That’s why we only use our *voice* when we’re talking with our priestesses. We don’t really show ourselves at all.”

Ah, that explains things—it was a well-known fact that the priestesses only heard the voices of the goddesses.

The light shining from Eir was dazzling, almost blinding. Was that what it was for? To obscure her true form and protect my sanity? My goddess had shown herself from the start, though.

“Noah...” I began. When we’d first met...had I been in more danger than I’d realized?

But Noah just giggled and stuck the tip of her tongue out cutely.

Th-This goddess...

“Makoto’s got that broken altered perspective from *RPG Player*, so *Charm* has no effect on him at all. You don’t need your backlighting either, Eir.”

“Oh, really? I’ll quit with it, then.” As she spoke, the bright light around her vanished. I guess she could just flick the switch on or off however she wanted...

“So,” I said, turning to Eir. “Why are you here?” There were actually things I’d wanted to ask her, so it was a real help that she was in my dream space.

“To speak to you of course.” She giggled. The gleam in her eyes looked just like when she’d spoken through Princess Sophia.

“Roses will fall...” I said, reciting the revelation she’d given. “Can you tell me

anything more specific?”

“Well, I’ve looked into it...but I haven’t found anything.”

“So there’s nothing I can do to stop the prophecy then?” I asked.

“Well, it’s probably got something to do with the Snake Sect...”

That made sense—the stronger a person’s belief in their god, the more the god’s protection obscured visions of that person’s future. The Snake Sect were all zealots of Typhon, so even the Sacred Deities found it hard to predict their plans.

“That’s not good...” I murmured. “Actually, how do you even know that it’ll happen?”

“Uh, Ira told me,” answered Eir.

Ira was the Goddess of Fortune and Fate, able to see the future as a whole. Well...I suppose that was a reliable source...and it meant that I couldn’t take an optimistic stance on the revelation potentially not coming to pass.

“I warned Sophie against the Snake Sect as well, so help her out, Mako! ☆”

I gave a sigh at her enthusiasm. “Got it.” If that was the current state of things, then there wasn’t anything I could actually start on yet...

I should speak to Noah next.

“Noa— Uh, Noah?” I’d turned to look at her, but she was just fiddling with her smartphone and not meeting my gaze.

Um...? They had smartphones in the divine realm?

“Hmph, what?” she griped. “You just go ahead and talk to Eir.”

Ack, she was sulking.

“I’m not sulking,” she whined in response to my thoughts. “I’m nooot.”

She really was.

“Y-You know you’re my number one, right? I can’t live without you,” I proclaimed, frantically trying to cheer her up.

“Oh, really? All right then.” She tossed the phone off to the side.

Phew... So she was back in a good mood?

“What do you want to know?” she asked.

“Undyne hasn’t shown up again.” I’d called out to her every day, but she hadn’t responded at all. Her radio silence was confusing since she’d helped me out in Highland.

“I already told you—normally, you’d need over level 1000 mastery to summon a great elemental like Undyne. She just happened to give you a hand that day because you were in trouble.”

“So...I was lucky?” I asked.

“Yup. Though, the elementals like you, so they might help if you’re in a real bind. Don’t just go assuming they’ll aid you every time—they’re capricious at best.”

Hmmm, so I couldn’t use their power strategically... Luck had too much of an impact. It seemed like *Charm* wasn’t going to be enough to get hold of Undyne whenever I wanted. What a shame.

“In that case...” I continued, “why could I suddenly see fire elementals?”

“Oh, when you kissed Lucy?” Noah clarified.

“Yeah! I even used fire magic!” I said, feeling agitated. Really, it’d gotten me all riled up.

“Mako...are you more excited about the fire elementals than the kiss?” wondered Eir. “I think you might be a pervert.”

“Hey...please don’t put it like that.” I didn’t deserve to be called a pervert. Kissing Lucy and seeing the fire elementals...were both important...

“You could see them thanks to the *Contract*.”

“A *Contract*?” I didn’t have any contract with Lucy, though.

“You know there’s more than one type of contract, right?” As she spoke, Noah snapped her fingers and summoned a whiteboard. I hadn’t seen her in teacher mode for a while. *Huh, even her outfit’s changed.*

“Firstly, there are *Soul Contracts* like you and I have. You offer your faith, and

in return, you receive my divine weapon and your *Elementaler* skill.”

“I remember that, great and wicked deity,” I answered.

“Heavenly punishment!” she declared, slapping me around the back of my head.

“But you’re not in heaven,” Eir sniped.

Noah just ignored her utterly and continued the lecture. “Next, there’s the *Guardian Knight Contract* you have with Furiae. They’re also called *Spoken Contracts*. You take on the role of her guardian and get the *Charm* skill in return.”

“Yup,” I said. “Though I can only use *Charm* on cats right now.”

“W-Well, work hard. ☆” Noah stammered.

Hmmm...I wonder if I could use it to control a griffin eventually. Probably not—it’d be easier to ask Furiae to do that.

“Then there’s the third type: the *Love Contract* you and Lucy have.”

“Wha?” That’d definitely taken a turn. *Love*?

“What? Kissing is a sign of being lovers, right?” Noah asked. “They had that whole ‘you may now kiss the bride’ thing in your old world, right?”

Noah was acting like it was obvious, but still...

“I’ve never been to a wedding.”

“Have you seen one on TV at least?”

Oh, right, I had. So...

“I can use *Synchro* like that since we’re together?”

“While you’re kissing,” Noah explained, “elementals see you as lovers and grant you their blessings.”

R-Right, so that was the logic behind it...

“By the way, it gets stronger as you go from lover to fiancé to spouse.”

“Huh...how romantic,” I mused.

Eir gave me a meaningful smile. “Noah hasn’t explained it all. Your contract with Lucy is also called a *Body Contract*.”

“Uh? A...*Body Contract*?”

Suddenly Eir became much more animated. “A *Body Contract* is a contract that gets stronger as the acts between you and your partner get more extreme. After kissing, there’s petting...then after that...there’s screwing.”

“W-W-Wait, Eir?!” It was *that* type of contract?

That’s not romantic at all!

“So you get to do the do with Lucy and gain even stronger magic!” Eir cheered. “Not bad, Mako!”

Th-That was terrifying... “The hell’s that contract?!”

“By the way,” Noah added, “you’ll need to kiss Lucy every time to see fire elementals. You don’t have the affinity for her magic after all.”

So kissing was a requirement. I could practically see it now: “Hey, Lucy, I’m going to practice fire magic today. Mind lending me your lips?”

“Hell nah!” What kind of scum was I?! Plus, Sasa’d punt me over the horizon! And I could already imagine Furiae staring me down like I was trash.

“Not gonna happen,” I stated. “I’ll have to give up on the fire elementals.”

“Aww, you’re giving up on them?” whined Eir. “What’s the harm? It’s only a kiss.”

“Yup, you shouldn’t waste such an easy win,” added Noah.

These goddesses... They sure loved messing with mortals. If I could go for it that easily, I’d have lost my virginity long ago.

“It’s about time for you to get going, Makoto,” Noah commented.

Indeed, my vision was starting to waver.

“W-Well, thank you for telling me all of that,” I replied, kneeling toward the two goddesses. They *had* shared a lot of info during the conversation.

“Bye, Mako. Look after Sophie as well.”

“Take care of yourself,” Noah said as I faded out.



I woke up alone. Furiae had cursed us all to slumber last night, but Lucy and Sasa weren't here anymore. I headed down to the first floor to wash my face.

I wonder if Furiae's mad...

When I stepped into the living room, I saw Furiae, though she wasn't alone—Lucy and Sasa were both there as well.

“Morning,” I called out.

Lucy and Sasa both turned to me and offered their own greetings.

“Did you sleep well?” asked Lucy.

“Yeah, thanks to—wait, what're you doing?” Lucy had sidled up to me and entwined our arms.

“It's my turn today,” Lucy murmured, “so just wait until tonight.”

“F-For what...?”

I vividly remembered the conversation I'd just had with Noah and Eir. *A Body Contract...*

“Are you really gonna make me say it?” Lucy asked. “Makoto, you perv.”

“Hold on, Lu,” interjected Sasa. “You interrupted us last night, so I'm coming too.”

“You are? Well, whatever. I guess it'll be the three of us.”

Where had this all come from?

“You three,” Furiae glared at us steadily, “if you're going to spend the night rutting, would you at least go to a hotel?”

Well, this was a sticky situation. “Let's not interrupt the princess's sleep tonight,” I said evenly.

“Aww.”

“That's a shame.”

But in the end, I managed to convince the pair, and then we had breakfast. The menu was rice and miso soup, grilled fish, and eggs. There were even pickled vegetables. Sasa had apparently made all of it. She'd pulled off a full Japanese breakfast...

"How do you eat with these?" Furiae asked, looking quizzically at the chopsticks.

"You can use a fork," Lucy told her. "We can't eat like Makoto or Aya."

"Hmmm, otherworlder cutlery..." pondered Furiae. "Oh, this soup is strangely delicious."

"Really? You can have seconds if you want, Fuu," Sasa chimed in.

The table devolved into the general bustle of mealtime, and even Furiae seemed to enjoy the Japanese food.

After we finished, we drank some tea, and Furiae spoke to me. "Incidentally, my knight—why are you constantly using *Charm*?"

"What?" I was? I hadn't expected that.

"I'm not, am I?"

"Go look in a mirror," she commanded.

I craned my neck to do so, and when I caught a glimpse of my reflection, I saw the faint orange light glowing in my eyes.

"Uh? H-Huh?" I hadn't realized I was doing that...not at all. *This could be bad...*

"Well, your level of *Charm* would only work on small animals," Furiae added.

Ah, well I guess it was fine then.

"Although," she continued, "it could affect people if they have powerful positive feelings toward you...or if it's nighttime because of the stronger connection to the moon. Watch out for that."

"That's awful!" I cried. If that was true...

I looked toward Lucy and Sasa, and they peered questioningly back. I suppose they didn't understand the implication...

“S-Sorry, Lucy, Sasa. It looks like I used *Charm* on you yesterday...maybe.” I could only hang my head for doing something like that to my friends.

“What do you mean? We love you. It has nothing to do with you using a *Charm* skill,” Lucy insisted.

“That’s right, Takatsuki. We didn’t do that last night because of *Charm*.”

“Right...”

That was great—at least they weren’t worried about it. Hang on though. I couldn’t just keep going around with *Charm* active all the time.

I turned to Furiae. “Princess, how do I control this?”

“Hm, well, I’ve been able to use it for as long as I’ve known, so turning it off’s unconscious... Look into my eyes for a minute.” At that, she got right up in my face and peered into my eyes. Then, she moved even closer so that our hair was touching.

“You’ll have to practice fine control with a mirror...” she explained. “But for now, try and hold back the mana around your eyes. That should pull it back.”

“Mhmm.” I tried to do as she’d instructed while staring into her onyx eyes.

“D-Did that do it?” I asked.

“It did. They’re black again. You got it.”

“Phew. Thanks, Princess... Wait, what are you doing?”

Her eyes were now shining gold. “I thought it might finally work on you from this close-up.”

“*Charm* just doesn’t work on me,” I said

“I can’t accept that—Wait...mage, warrior? Why are you grabbing my arms?”

“All right, back away from Makoto.”

“Fuu, no tempting our Takatsuki.”

Apparently, Furiae *still* wasn’t willing to admit that *Charm* didn’t affect me. While I repented for not learning how to properly use the new skill I’d gotten, Lucy stood up.

“Hey, Fuuri, Aya and I are going shopping today. Want to come with?”

“Uh... You wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not. Lu showed me around before. There are more shops than you’d expect in Macallan,” said Sasa.

“I see... I’ll come with you, then.”

I guess the three of them were going shopping together.

“What about you?” Sasa asked me.

“I’ll practice my magic.”

I didn’t want to be the third—or fourth—wheel, so I decided to pass. Considering I was Furiae’s guardian knight, I should probably have gone with her, but she was safe enough with Lucy and Sasa. Honestly, she was safer with them than with me alone.

Oh, there is one thing I should warn her about...

“There’ve been a lot of guys after you lately, Princess,” I informed her. “Take care.”

She was a well-to-do young lady that had suddenly arrived in Macallan from abroad. (That was the story we were going with, at least.) According to the rumors, her awe-inspiring beauty had already captured many hearts in Macallan.

Furiae just huffed out a laugh. “I will be fine. There were endless men who saw me as an easy mark in the ruins of Laphroaig. The worst that’ll happen here is I’ll be hit on, no? That’s nothing.”

Every time I heard about her past it felt heavier. Still, she seemed to be enjoying herself now.

“R-Right... But even so, look after yourself.”

With that, the three of them bustled cheerily out the door. Left behind on my own, I worked on my magic in the garden. When noon rolled around and they still hadn’t come back, I guessed they were eating out somewhere.

Cooking...was just too much effort, so I decided to do the same. But as I was

wandering around deciding where to eat, I noticed something strange.

I don't recognize a lot of these people...

I'd lived in Macallan for a long time now. While it might be a fairly big town, I still recognized the people in the neighborhood. Macallan did have a lot of adventurers, so new faces weren't unusual. However, the people around now *weren't* adventurers. They were civilians, but not the same people that had lived here up until now... Maybe they'd simply moved in, but it felt like there were too many new faces for that.

Compounding the strangeness, I could feel them watching me.

Eir warned me about the Snake Sect...

Just as I was just making a mental note to talk to Fujiyan and ask if there was anything dodgy about the newcomers, the sharp sound of a ringing bell split the air. An atmosphere of tension instantly seemed to grip the town.

It was just like in Symphonia.

What? This has never happened in Roses before.

"Monsters!" a soldier on watch suddenly exclaimed. Residents of Macallan swiftly fled and hid away in their homes. And yet...no one seemed to show any signs of actual fear. Their expressions looked more like they were saying, "Seriously, again?"

The hell? This peaceful town had become a hotbed of danger...

As the town moved, I remembered something Mary had told me when I'd first become an adventurer: the third rule of the Macallan Adventurer's Guild was that if monsters appeared, we were to cooperate with the soldiers and Temple Knights to protect the town. Roses had a deficit in their armed forces, and Macallan in particular was close to one of the biggest dungeons on the continent—the Forest of Fiends. Both of these factors meant that the members of the guild were often called to action.

Still, I thought monsters only showed up once a year or so... They seemed to be more prevalent now, probably due to the general increase in monster activity.

I rushed over toward the western gate where the monsters had been spotted, and I saw other adventurers on the way.

“Makoto! You’re here!”

“Jean!” I called out to my friend. He was in a party of four with Emily, a male martial artist, and a female mage.

“Where’s Lucy?” Emily asked. She was an adventurer of Macallan as well, so she surely knew the rules about pitching in during monster attacks.

“We were doing our own things today,” I answered. “She was shopping with Sasa.”

I wished I’d been able to meet up with the girls along the way, but my group arrived at the west gate before long. There were already a dozen adventurers there, along with the guards and some Temple Knights.

“Oh, the hero’s here!” someone called.

“Makoto, there are about five hundred monsters,” someone else added.

“It’s a group of goblins, orcs, and ogres.”

“Hurry with the orders.”

“You pick the formation.”

What...?

The adventurers were all staring at me. Actually, it wasn’t even just the adventurers—everyone else was as well.

“W-Wait a minute!” Why was I the one making the decisions?!

As I floundered, Jean explained. “Makoto, the most senior official takes command during emergency situations like this. None of us are more senior than a hero.”

O-Oh, right! The eighth rule... I’d barely thought about it since I was sure it would never affect me.

Seriously, though? I was going to have to command everyone. Their stares were all focused on me.

I'm awful at large-scale strategy, though!

"Wh-Where's Lucas?!" I asked. He was a veteran, so surely he could lead properly.

"Lucas went to help the next town over when a dragon showed up," Emily explained regretfully.

N-No way...

"Makoto! We want a real hero here!" Jean's male fighter said passionately. "We'll follow your commands!"

I-I can't...

Though I was a senior figure in Roses, I didn't feel like acting that way in front of a bunch of people I didn't know... The crowd's collective gaze grew even heavier, putting pressure on me to get started.

I-I wanna run...

"All right, everyone'h! I'll act as his rep'h!" shouted a loud voice. It drew everyone's attention.

Across the crowd, I saw the bunny-eared fighter raising a hand. "Nina?" I asked.

I could hear the other adventurers talking as well.

"It's Nina."

"She made gold rank, right?"

"I thought she'd gotten married... Isn't she the Fujiwara company head's wife now?"

"Didn't she retire?"

Amongst the murmuring, I heard Lucy and Sasa calling out to me, followed shortly after by Furiae.

"Takatsuki, you don't mind leaving it to Nina, right?" asked Sasa.

"N-Nah... That is, if you don't mind either, Nina?"

"Leave it to me'h!"

In an instant, she briskly started giving orders. She was always dealing with a bunch of subordinates while managing retail, so she was good in these types of scenarios.

“Thanks, Sasa...”

“Nina told us about the guild’s rules on the way. You’re not great at leading strangers, are you?”

I wasn’t, and she’d really saved my bacon. Sasa knew me really well...

Just then, an adventurer pointed and exclaimed, “The monsters are here!” Where his finger indicated, there was a group of monsters kicking up dust. I saw goblins, orcs, and ogres, along with the odd man-eating giant.

This group honestly didn’t have the sheer force of presence that the five thousand ancient monsters in Highland had.

On the other hand, our forces in Roses were vastly lower as well, so even this smaller swarm of monsters was still a significant threat to Macallan.

“Mages’h! Fire’h!”

At Nina’s command, the mages all launched their spells. We were starting off with ranged attacks, which was basically the same as the Soleil Knights’ strategy had been.

Then, I heard a familiar voice.

“Meteo Rain!”

Massive boulders plowed into the monsters and left huge divots in the ground, making the earth shudder beneath us. Dozens of the monsters screeched as they were launched away.

That spell had been cast by a very familiar redheaded elf.

“What do you think?!” Lucy asked, puffing out her chest. Her Meteo Rain was incredible every time I saw it.

“There are still many of them left, though,” Furiae pointed out. And she was right—the long-range attacks had taken out about a hundred monsters, but most were still on their feet.

“Shielders, form up’h!”

The people holding shields were a mix of Temple Knights and soldiers. There were about fifty of them in total. In addition to the twenty mages, there were about thirty close combatants. Most of those groups were adventurers. In total, there were about a hundred people defending Macallan.

Was this it? There weren’t many of us...

Over three hundred monsters were bearing down on the town. At least numerically, that made their forces three times stronger than ours. And...the terrifying part of mass battles like this was that numbers could definitely overcome you.

The soldiers’ faces were grim. If they couldn’t stop the charge, the city would soon be overrun.

Right, time to try and create a wall like I did in Highland. That’ll buy us some time.

As far as elementals were concerned, I was in a much better position now than then.

“*Elementals*,” I called out.

“Hi!”

I was on good terms with the water elementals in Macallan since I’d been practicing here all this time. Though I might not be able to call the greater elementals, Macallan was still the best place for me to use elemental magic.

“*I’m in a bit of trouble here. Can you give me some help?*” I asked, doing my utmost to get through to them. I also activated *Charm* like Furiae had taught me.

A pleasant chorus of their voices answered. “*You can count on us!*”

Mana from all the water elementals in the area swirled around me.

“M-My knight, that mana...”

“Takatsuki’s sparkling...”

I could hear my friends muttering to each other. All the mages stared my way

in shock.

The elementals were in good form today. I lifted my right hand and then yelled.

Water Magic: Ice World!

The mass of mana surrounding me morphed into blue light as it avalanched over the monsters. I didn't create a wall of ice—rather, I froze the monsters themselves into a wall. This was a two-birds-one-stone approach; I could get rid of some of them, *and* make a barrier.

And it worked. Almost too well...

There was silence as the front line of monsters solidified into ice sculptures.

That's what I was going for...

Everyone's eyes found me... And I knew exactly what they wanted to say.

"Mister Takatsuki...you froze them all'h..." Nina said with a rueful smile.

Yup. All three hundred of them were on ice. Our close combatants had all been raring to go, but now, they had odd looks on their faces.

I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to kill-steal!

"Eh, it's fine, right?" Lucy asked. "We're all safe thanks to that spell."

"Yup. I might not have gotten my turn, but as long as we're all safe—brrr." My spell must have been too strong because Sasa was shivering from the cold now.

"Luuu, warm me up!" she exclaimed, grabbing hold of Lucy.

"Fiiine," Lucy teased, hugging her back. I could almost smell the yuri.

"Well, it's over before it even started," one of the other adventurers commented. Now that the tension had broken, everyone was chatting.

"What about the reward from the guild?"

"Who knows?"

"Makoto, that was incredible!"

"It was really something!"

At least Jean and his fighter friend were impressed.

“I wonder why they showed up out of nowhere,” I heard someone say.

“There were more of them than last time.”

“It’s almost like they were being chased...”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

That comment about them being “chased” stuck out in my mind...and it was immediately followed by a roar that shook the air above us.

I looked up.

“A green dragon!” someone yelled.

A massive dragon entirely covered in green scales stared back at us. Its huge frame had appeared, accompanied by the thunderous beating of its wings. This monster was infamous...it was known as the lord of the Great Forest.

“Scatter’h!” Nina yelled. “We’re targets if we’re together’h!”

At her command, the adventurers all separated. Mages launched magic toward the dragon, but...

“Nothing’s hitting,” said Sasa.

She was right—it was too fast to pin down.

“Lucy, what about a Meteo?” I asked

“I can try, but it’ll fall on us if it misses...”

“Ack, no good then.” The damage if it missed would be too great.

Just then, the dragon roared, and something rolled off its wings.

“It’s attacking!” someone yelled.

“Run!”

Dozens of...spears...were falling from it?! That was *Wood Magic: Wood Lance!*

“Fuu, Lu, watch out!” Sasa yelled. She leaped up, kicking away the spears that looked like they’d hit our friends.

Dodge! I thought hurriedly, using the skill to evade.

After that wave subsided, I peered around. Several people had been struck by spears. It didn't *look* like anyone was dead, but... This was bad. We couldn't hit the dragon, but it could definitely hit us.

"It's...using the sun at its back," Lucy realized, looking up. The green dragon was right above us, positioned almost directly in front of the sun.

Was that on purpose...? That strategy was very intelligent for a monster... Because of the light shining behind it, the mages couldn't target it properly. The swordsmen were out of range, and even Nina looked to be at a loss.

What was our next move? I looked around to see if anyone had an idea.

There were normally veterans other than Lucas in Macallan, but all of them were away right now. We'd gotten unlucky...

Shall I try a water dragon for the hell of it? I wondered. Lessons at the Water Temple taught me that *Water Magic* skills weren't very effective against green dragons since they were wood-aligned creatures.

I didn't have any other options though, so I decided to give it a go.

But just as I opened my mouth to call to the elementals, I heard a light tinkling noise. Suddenly, a huge blue beam of light lanced out across the sky.

The light struck the dragon, splitting its body in two, and the beast roared its last breath.

That was water mana...

There were no spellswords in Macallan that could cut a dragon in two with a single slash. Hell, there were only a few in the whole country.

I recognized that mana. However, the mana I remembered had been much weaker.

Someone landed on the ground with a slight thump. They were wearing white traveling clothes and a girlishly beautiful smile. In their hand was a gorgeous magic sword.

"Makoto, are you okay?" he asked brightly.

The voice came from none other than the Hero of Ice and Snow—Prince

Leonardo.

What's he doing here?

◇ Christina Macallan's Perspective ◇

We were in an office in the Macallan estate. By “we,” I meant myself and my older sister, Violet.

“Chris, I will be the next Lady Macallan,” she declared with a graceful laugh. “I have the backing of the Pulteney family after all.”

I gritted my teeth. The Pulteneys were one of the highest-ranking noble families in Roses. How in the world did she form that connection?

Violet chuckled. “Younger sisters can never beat out their elders.”

“Y-You haven't won yet, Violet! I will not give up!”

I inferred that the Pulteney backing indicated that Violet had spent a vast amount of money for her own political gain. That would be bad at the best of times, but with monster activity increasing in Roses, we needed the money to stockpile military force and provisions. Becoming the liege of the land was one thing, but it was all pointless if the person in power financially ruined Macallan.

“It seems that our contest has already been—”

Suddenly, my husband opened the door and interrupted Violet's victory speech. “Lady Chris, we must speak.”

“Sir Fujiwara?” I asked.

“Prince Leonardo has arrived in Macallan,” he stated

My sister and I uttered confused noises. *This is so abrupt... Why did the prince come here?*

“Prince Leonardo is...in Macallan?” Violet murmured to herself vacantly.

Leonardo Eir Roses was the prince of Roses and the eldest son of the reigning king. The rules of succession in Roses dictated that he would inherit the title after his father.

“Wh-Why?!” Violet squawked. “He shouldn't be able to leave the capital!”

Her earlier composure was nowhere to be seen and had been replaced with distress. However, this level of panic was no surprise—Prince Leonardo was such a high-ranking noble that the idea of him traveling to a border town like Macallan was practically unthinkable.

Sir Fujiwara did not answer Violet's question but addressed me instead. "Lady Chris, I have been charged with Prince Leonardo's escort," he explained. "What will you do?"

"I-I will join you!" I exclaimed before turning to Violet. "Sister, we will continue this at a later time."

She didn't reply.

◇ Makoto's Perspective ◇

"To Macallan's great Hero of Ice and Snow, Sir Leonardo!"

"Cheers!"

The area around the guild entrance was in the midst of revelry. In other words, it was business as usual.

"Wow, so this is the guild where you spend all your time?" the prince marveled, looking around with shining eyes at the adventurers as they partied away.

"How come you're here, Prince Leo?" Sasa asked.

"Well, about that..."

It seemed that Leo was touring the country and training—he regretted just how close Horn had come to being overrun when the blight monster attacked.

"Macallan's right out in the sticks, though," Lucy pointed out. "Surely there are bigger towns you could have visited."

Lucy...you've got Chris—the lord of the land's daughter—right next to you... Choose your words a bit better.

"Um, well... This is where Makoto lives..." Prince Leonardo said, looking up at me through his lashes. He blushed slightly, his cheeks becoming pink.

Cute...

By the way, there were knights guarding the prince, but they were all keeping watch outside. They could have come in and eaten too...but they'd all firmly refused. Meanwhile, the Macallan adventurers were celebrating. After all, the people we cared about had escaped harm from a swarm of monsters.

Fujiyan, Nina, and Chris had all joined us at the table, and Fujiyan had apparently provided lodgings for the prince. Well, the term "lodgings" might not have been quite accurate... In actuality, Prince Leonardo had been offered a guest room in my house. I still wasn't entirely sure about making the prince of my country stay at a commoner's house...

Speaking of nobility, apparently, Chris had managed to surpass her older sister. She'd thought that would be her biggest hurdle. This was great news, and according to Fujiyan and Nina, Chris's place as Macallan's next lord was almost set in stone, so she would be the next person to rule over this region. That sounded fantastic to me.

Still, though, it sorta felt like I hadn't actually done anything to help... Fujiyan had just told me not to worry about it.

Well, if he said so. Anyway, I had something else to ask him.

"Oh right, Fujiyan—I've seen a lot of new people in Macallan...ones that I've never seen before. Know anything about them?"

"I do," he replied. "They are here because you are."

I stared blankly at him.

"Many people wished to move to Macallan because the Hero of Roses lives here," Chris explained.

"The Fujiwara company also provides work for those that have none'h," Nina added.

So...I was the reason that there were more strangers around? And on top of that, I was the only one who didn't know about it?

"See!" exclaimed Lucy. "It's so cool that you're a hero!"

"When I'm walking around town, I occasionally hear people talking about you," Sasa said.

For real? Well, at least the pair of them seemed happy.

After that, we spent some time talking about what Chris would be doing to develop Macallan, then moved on to discussing Fujiyan's next business ventures.

While we were talking, Jean's martial artist friend came over to us. "Makoto! Good work today! I'll pour you a drink!" Though he was a new adventurer, his body was pretty built, so he must have trained himself up.

He soon introduced himself as Tony.

"Thanks, Tony," I said as he passed me a massive glass of ale. I had no idea how I was going to drink all of it.

"Makoto, he really wanted to chat," Jean interjected. "Play nice."

I guess Jean was really taking the mentor thing seriously.

"Makoto! That spell was amazing!" gushed Tony. "How did you do it? Can I look at your muscles?"

"Uh, magic's got nothing to do with muscle—"

"Wow, so these are a hero's muscles," Tony said, squeezing me. "They feel so nice!"

Hey, look with your eyes! I shuddered and backed up a bit.

"So, would you consider partying up with me at some point?!" he asked, immediately closing the distance between us until he was in my personal space again.

"Uh, yeah, at some point."

"We can go to the hot springs after! I'll wash your back!" he offered.

My backside prickled slightly for some reason.

"Makoto! I'll come adventure with you too!" the prince added.

"S-Sure, Prince Leonardo."

I wasn't sure why he'd joined in the conversation. Did he even have the spare time to come adventuring?

All the while, Tony closed in oppressively while Prince Leonardo did so cutely. *Is this what they call being popular with the guys?* All their zealousness might not be so bad after all.

I downed the whole glass of beer.

My eyes soon found their way over to Lucy and the others.

“That Meteo Rain spell was incredible!” exclaimed the mage girl from Jean’s party. She was clinging to Lucy. Her hair was reddish-brown, and she had round eyes. *I think they said her name was Monica?*

For once, even Lucy seemed overwhelmed. “Um, Monica? I think you’re holding a bit too tight...”

“You’re so strong,” said the fawning Monica. “Would you go on an expedition with me at some point?”

“Y-Yeah, we can go with Emily and the others.”

Lucy was being invited as well... Maybe we could all go together and just call it a joint exercise.

Monica had started breathing heavily. “Your skin’s so nice and clear. You’re really warm as well. I want those arms around me...”

“H-Hey! Emily, I think she’s drunk,” Lucy said, looking for help from her friend.

“She is? Well, she’s a good girl. You’re in the hero’s party, so you should help your junior mages,” Emily replied before turning to Sasa. “By the way, Aya, I heard you know a lot about Labyrinthos? Do you?”

“I mean...I guess so?” Sasa answered vaguely.

Guess so, my foot—that’s where Sasa grew up in this world.

“We’re thinking of giving it a go,” Emily continued. “Mind giving us a rundown? I’ll tell you about a secret dessert shop in exchange for info.”

“Sure!” Sasa cheered.

Looks like they’ve agreed on a contract already.

“Lucy, I feel kinda dizzy,” murmured Monica. “Can you take me back to my room?”

“Calm down and have some water first.”

Lucy seemed to be on the receiving end of quite a bit of affection from her own junior. I realized that, at some point, *we’d* become the mentors. It made me miss the days of competing with Jean’s party as a novice group of adventurers.

We all chatted for a bit longer before I foisted Tony off on Jean and moved away. Mary had finished work for the day, so I went to sit next to her. The prince followed.

“Oh, Makoto. Good work to...day.” Mary suddenly looked startled. “Prince Leonardo?! We are honored that you would visit such a—”

The prince cut her off with a smile. “Don’t worry about it. I’m fine with things being casual.”

“Thanks, Mary,” I said. “Today was a huge pain. Have monsters been coming at the town like that more often lately?”

“They have. This is the third time this month...” she lamented. Usually, Mary had a cheery expression when she drank, but now, she was gloomy.

If fights like the one today were happening constantly, then things were really bad. Prince Leonardo had luckily been there to help us, but usually, Macallan’s defense forces would have to figure things out with Lucas and the other veterans.

Unfortunately, a lot of those veterans had stopped showing up.

She glumly tilted her glass. “We’re also seeing more people get wounded... Things here aren’t good.”

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked.

She looked blankly at me for a second and then suddenly started to smile. “When did my little Makoto get so reliable? I should’ve called dibs earlier.” She reached up and started giving me a noogie.

“Ow, jeez.” *Yup, that’s more like the Mary I know.*

At that, her mood seemed to perk up. “Right, then let’s drink! To Makoto, the hero!”

“We’ve already celebrated that a dozen times,” I complained.

“You two are close,” Prince Leonardo remarked as he sipped his soda.

Whoops, I’d been neglecting the prince...

“We are, Prince Leonardo,” Mary replied. “I was the one that issued Makoto’s adventurer license when he first came to Macallan. Then he got famous for hunting goblins and—”

“Quit it, Mary,” I griped. I just knew she was about to reveal that embarrassing old nickname.

“I want to hear about Makoto’s adventures!” said the prince enthusiastically.

“I’ll tell you everything then!” Mary cheered back.

Damn, she’s in chatty mode. We’ll be here for a while.

Well, whatever—the night is still young.

Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Learns *Mana Blade*

The celebration continued into the night, and as midnight came and went, we finally headed home. Everyone else had gone to sleep, but I couldn't settle down. Instead, I went out to my back garden to train.

"Nrow, nrow," mewed the same black cat who was always around. Guess it was hungry.

I went over to the water and used magic to catch some fish for it. When the fish flopped onto land, the cat pounced and started chowing down.

I stroked its fur as I considered the day's events.

We would've been in a way worse position if Prince Leonardo hadn't been there... It was honestly a miracle no one had died.

Fujiyan had said that Macallan's population was growing because a hero (me) lived in the town. But the hero's role was to stand on the front line when the town was in danger. The Temple Knights, adventurers, and volunteer soldiers had all become my subordinates.

I sighed mentally.

So that's a hero's duty, huh? It all weighed heavily on me.

In the first RPG I'd ever played, the hero saved a princess from a dragon all on his own and then defeated the demon lord.

I wish things were like that... If they were, I could travel how I liked, visit whatever towns I wanted, and go on adventures on a whim. I *did* still enjoy adventuring with Lucy and Sasa.

Just...having responsibility over people I didn't even know was a lot of pressure...and I didn't really want it. Maybe I was selfish.

I peered up at the clouds that obscured the moon and turned things over in my head.

"Makoto?" a voice called out suddenly. "Are you training?"

I turned and saw that the question had come from Prince Leonardo. The black cat must have been surprised by a new person in the garden because it bolted off.

“What’s up?” I asked. “You shouldn’t stay up all night.”

Prince Leonardo was silent for a moment. Eventually, he said, “Please, don’t treat me like a child.” His voice seemed distinctly pouty.

Adorable.

“Excuse me, Prince.” Back in my old world, someone his age would be an elementary schooler, so to me, he was a kid no matter how you sliced it. I guess in this world, though, he was a hero charged with the safety of the continent...

What a tough life.

“These were made with water magic, right?” he asked, pointing at the water butterflies flitting around the area. “There are so many!”

“Yeah, I’m just practicing. Well, and reviewing my skills.”

I explained the battle with the green dragon, telling the prince about how weak my magic had been, and how hard it’d been to channel the elementals.

“I see...” Prince Leonardo mused. “So you can’t show your full strength when there’s no water around...and the number of water elementals in an area also affects your power, rendering your magic stronger or weaker. On top of those things, an opponent’s resistance or vulnerability to *Water Magic* spells can determine the outcome of a battle...”

“Yeah... There are a lot of hangups with my magic,” I joked.

The prince’s expression remained serious. “I think we should share that information with the general HQ in Highland.”

“What do you mean?”

“By ‘HQ,’ I mean the group of people responsible for the Northern Front Plan. Sophia and I participate in the meetings periodically.”

“Oh... So defeating the demon lord’s going to be Sakurai’s job, then?” After all, he was (being treated as) the legendary savior’s reincarnation.

At my question, the prince's expression clouded over. "A team of heroes from the six nations will be challenging the demon lord... Well, that *was* the plan, but Roses's hero was seen as too young...and left out of the group."

"I-I see..." Maybe I shouldn't have asked.

"But!" he exclaimed, lifting his face and smiling brightly. "A Hero of Roses—one who's capable of defeating five thousand ancient monsters alone—suddenly appeared."

"Guh..." *Guess that's me.*

"I don't know the full details, but the staff seems to be planning to include you as part of the main force."

"Seriously...?" I asked. Honestly, I couldn't even defeat a stray green dragon on my own...

"But your explanation might mean that you'd be better suited to one of the other demon lords, rather than the King of Beasts."

Another one...?

"Like maybe the King of the Ancient Drakes," the prince continued, "or the Abyssal King...?"

Zagan, the King of Beasts, reigned over much of the demon continent.

Forneus, the Abyssal King, controlled the seas around it.

And finally, Astaroth, the King of Ancient Drakes, ruled the air.

These three demon lords were like the army, navy, and air force of the demon continent.

"The current plan is to target Zagan, right?" I asked. That's what the knight commander had told me in Highland.

The idea of facing all three at once felt like too much...like we'd suffer too many casualties. Zagan was the primary target because he was positioned to cause the most damage to our forces. The Abyssal King controlled the seas and had sea monsters as subordinates, which meant that they wouldn't attack us on land; the King of Ancient Drakes was the demon continent's guardian, so he

rarely left it. On the other hand, the King of Beasts was the demon lord who would supposedly attack the four continents—he would try to subjugate and then rule the entire world as the Great Demon Lord returned.

Because of this, the working plan was to defeat Zagan.

“It is,” Prince Leonardo confirmed. “The main force will fight against the King of Beasts while other detachments keep the other two busy—this should work to hold off any reinforcements.”

“I get it. I guess the other demon lords wouldn’t just sit and watch us attack.” If this was the plan, then the battlefield against the Abyssal King would be the sea... I’d be best there.

“I’ll inform the staff,” the prince promised. That was a relief. “And I’ll follow your example and train.”

As he spoke, the prince slipped the sword at his waist from its sheath and began swinging it. The blue-green blade whistled through the air, shining faintly as it left trailing arcs in its wake.

Right...that was the magic sword that had bisected the green dragon.

“Prince Leonardo, what is that sword?” I asked.

“This is the holy sword Ascalon, passed down through the Roses family line. They told me I had to learn how to use it now that the Great Demon Lord is returning...”

“Oh! A holy sword? Can I see?” I hadn’t ever used a holy sword before!

“Here, go ahead,” he said, passing it to me.

As I held it, I noticed magic circles engraved into the blade. There was a holy sword in my hands, but—

“Ugh, heavy.”

—it weighed too much. I doubted I’d even be able to wield it.

And to think, the prince had been swinging it around like it was nothing...

“Take it back,” I said. “Also, why’s it not shining like when you defeated the green dragon?” The light surrounding it had been much brighter during the

battle.

“That’s my mana encompassing it. My *Ice Sword* skill makes the mana glow blue.”

“I see.”

Mana around the sword... So that was something you could do?

“I’ll give it a go.”

“What?” asked the prince.

I drew Noah’s dagger. *Elementals*, I called mentally as I lifted my blade into the air. I focused on directing the mana from the water elementals into the dagger.

“Huh?” I uttered, startled. “The elementals are...being absorbed?”

Several of the elementals had become one with the dagger, and my blade was now shining brightly. At the same time, I could feel a pulsing...like the dagger was alive.

“Makoto!” the prince called in a slight panic, bringing me back down to earth.

Suddenly, I realized that my dagger was starting to keen unsettlingly.

Huh? What’s happening? I wondered. *Oh...guess I need to control the mana better.*

“M-Makoto! It’s going out of control!” he yelled.

“Wait a minute,” I requested, using *Calm Mind* to control the mana. I spun the turbulent mana into more of an organized vortex—the sound of my blade morphed into more of a pleasant chime, and there was now a dense layer of mana swirling around it.

Nice.

“Y-You controlled it?”

“I got more mana from the elementals than I expected...so I messed up a bit.”

“It feels like there’s king class mana in that dagger...” murmured the prince.

“It’s great. Seems pretty easy to use as well.”

If a mage gathered too much mana, then they could get manasick and lose control. But, if the mana was being stored in the dagger, I could be safe from that side effect. I had a feeling that this skill would be useful in the future.

“Wow... There’s as much mana in that dagger as in a dozen mages...”

“There’s that much?” I asked. *I should probably take that statement with a grain of salt.*

I gazed down at the shining dagger in my hand. *What to do with it... Hmmm...*

After pondering a moment, I lifted my arm and swung the dagger at the sky. A low *vwrap* sounded from the blade, and a massive crescent of magic flew from it. The magic sheared through the sky, ripping apart the clouds that blocked the moon.



“Whoa!” I exclaimed. That was pretty strong! It did take time to use this skill though.

Prince Leonardo looked agape. “I don’t think you’ll have a problem with that not being powerful enough,” he said, “even against a dragon.”

“But it takes a while to gather the mana,” I pointed out. Would I be able to take things so leisurely against a dragon?

“You sure don’t let yourself grow complacent.” The prince was staring at me in admiration.

After that, the two of us chatted for a while, discussing magic swords and the Northern Front Plan. Keeping the young prince awake might not have been the best idea, though. He fell asleep partway through our conversation, so I tucked him into my bed.

And since my room was occupied, I kept practicing until morning.



“So sleepy...” I muttered. It was because I’d gotten caught up in conversation with the prince last night. Having a chat about swords and magic with another guy was fun. The prince had eventually fallen asleep though, and I’d stayed up until sunrise.

Prince Leonardo apparently had some form of obligation around town, so he’d left already. After he’d gone out, I’d managed a nap. I’d then eaten the breakfast that Sasa had made, and now I was continuing my training.

“Hm, maybe I should have another nap...” I grumbled through a yawn, stroking the black cat on my lap. The chirping of birds filled my ears. *Whoops, I really am about to drop off...*

As I noticed my exhaustion, I heard some footsteps. The others had said that they were going shopping today, so maybe they were back?

“Hero Makoto,” said a familiar voice, “do you have some spare time?”

It was Princess Sophia.

We were in a room of a church dedicated to Eir.

Princess Sophia had summoned me here, and now I was sitting on a soft sofa. I'd been living in Macallan for a fair while, but this was the first time I'd been into the church. The princess and I were the only two in the room, and she was humming as she brewed tea...with much more skill than last time.

The room was warm, and soft sunlight radiated in through a crack in the curtains.

I'm nodding off here...

If I didn't pay attention, I'd be asleep in no time.

"Hero Makoto, I do apologize for the wait."

Princess Sophia placed a cup of tea in front of me, and I detected a sweet muscat scent drifting up from it. She then put a plate of chocolate chip cookies down next to it.

"Thank you," I said, taking a sip of the tea. It was delicious. I followed it up with a cookie.

"Huh?" I uttered.

"What is it?"

The cookie was soft and it crumbled in my mouth. It felt...like I'd eaten one of these before.

"Where did you find these cookies?" I asked.

"They have been rather popular in the capital as of late. The Fujiwara company sells them."

Oh, Fujiyan?! So they're Japanese?

"What's the brand name, out of interest?"

"Ah, I believe it was something like Country Ma'am?" answered the princess. "It's a strange name."

"Yeah, it figures." That was a famous brand from our old world. He'd really nailed it. Before I realized it, I'd taken a second cookie and then a third.

"I see you like them." Princess Sophia smiled.

Yikes, I almost forgot that I was in front of a princess. "Please, excuse my manners," I apologized.

Her expression dimmed at that.

"What's wrong, Princess?" I asked.

"Um... Could you stop addressing me so stiffly?"

"Addressing you?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"You can relax, and...could you call me Sophia?"

"What?" She didn't want me to use her title? Sh-Should I?

Why not? Noah chimed in mentally. *Go for it!*

Are you sure? I'm a commoner... Should I really be addressing her like that?

I think she's jealous of Lucy and Aya, said Noah.

So the princess found the formal address stuffy... She'd even told me so herself.

Princess Sophia—no, just Sophia—shifted uneasily in front of me.

"Sophia?" I said.

"Right! Makoto." She met my eyes with a smile, then we both looked away at the same time, embarrassed. Her cheeks were pink as she changed the topic. "I hear that you have spoken to Leo about the Northern Front Plan."

"I have. Apparently, I'm going to need to join the other heroes."

"This is related to that..." She began to explain things, her tone apologetic.

Apparently, either Prince Leonardo or I would need to join the expedition. The Soleil Knights' commander-in-chief had nominated me. The North Cardinal Knights' leader—Gerald Ballantine—had also demanded that I participate.

H-Honestly...that Gerry.

"Well, I suppose I'll join," I said. After all, they'd been told I could fight against the Abyssal King.

“No, Leo will,” Sophia said strongly.

“On his own?” I asked. “He’s still young, so he shouldn’t have to...”

She felt like a bit of a taskmaster.

“The family of Roses is a symbol of the country’s peace,” explained Sophia. “However strong the otherworlder heroes are, we cannot rely solely upon them. Besides, if we lose this battle, we will be under demon rule and have nowhere to run.”

Her words were firm.

Well, Prince Leonardo *was* rather strong with that holy sword.

“I’ll go with him then,” I said easily.

She sighed. “That’s precisely why he admires you so strongly... Please, look after him. He’s a rather timid child on the whole.”

“Got it, you can count on me.”

She must be worried... Her expression was definitely that of an older sister concerned for her brother.

That soon changed though—she quickly reverted to her princess-like expression. “You are a hero of our country, so I would like for you to meet the heroes of other nations. Particularly, those of Springroque and Great Keith. Once the demon army attacks, those are the countries we will need to cooperate with.”

“So, I’ll be a diplomat?”

I guess this is another duty of a hero... I didn’t know the etiquette for visiting another country. Wouldn’t Prince Leonardo be more suitable than a commoner like me?

Sophia stared out the window and spoke heavily. “I have visited nearby towns over the past several days. Monster activity has increased in all of them. Roses’s small defense force will be unable to keep them under control.”

She sure had a lot on her plate... I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I gazed out of the window as well. But as I did, *Sense Danger* suddenly started blaring in

my head. *Monsters? In town?* Princess Sophia had noticed something as well.

“Hero Makoto!” she cried, pointing. “There!”

“That’s...a wyvern?” As I looked in the direction she’d indicated, I saw a single wyvern flying over the town.

A stray from the Great Forest? Macallan’s guards didn’t seem to have noticed.

“We cannot risk it attacking children,” Sophia said. “We need to tell the guards.”

“Wait a minute. We can drive it off,” I suggested, prompting her to stop. “Can I borrow some mana, Sophia?”

She paused for a moment. “Again?” Then, she nodded with reddened cheeks. “I suppose... I don’t mind if it’s you.”

Why is she embarrassed?

Whatever—I was sleepy and wanted to deal with this quickly. I grabbed her hand. *Now that I think of it, I might not have considered this properly...* I hadn’t slept enough so I wasn’t quite thinking straight.

Do you really want to *Synchro* with Princess Sophia?

►Yes

No

With the situation being what it was, I didn’t even consider *RPG Player’s* warning.

I tightened my grip on her hand. We looked into each other’s eyes from right up close. Slightly embarrassed, I activated *Synchro*.

“Ngh...” came a soft gasp from Sophia next to me. I soon felt the pleasant sensation of a large amount of mana flowing into me.

“*Water Magic: Ice Arrow*,” I cast, sending thousands of arrows of ice flying at the wyvern. Instantly, it shrieked and fell away from the town.

That worked great! Her *Ice Magic (King Rank)* always helped me out so much.

“Thanks, Sophia.”

“It was wonderful, Hero Makoto...” she murmured.

I turned around as she trailed off and found her staring off dazedly.

“Hm? What’s u—”

Suddenly, she pushed me down, trapping me between her body and the floor. The carpet was plush, so it didn’t exactly hurt. She just held herself over me.

“Sophia? What’s wro—”

“Makoto...” she interrupted, before leaning into a passionate kiss.

What?!

Her arms wound around my neck as she pulled her lips even closer.



Wh-What the hell? This came out of nowhere! What'd happen— That was as far as my thoughts got before Noah cut me off.

You're Charming her, she informed me.

It was that comment that finally made me notice my slipup—I'd apparently activated my *Charm* skill while half asleep.

Frantically, I closed my eyes and cut off the mana. When I opened them again, I saw a taken aback expression on her face. She stood up and backed rapidly away. Then, she went pale.

"Wh-What in the world did I do..." She stared at her palms in disbelief.

"P-Princess Sophia...?"

"But...I need to stay pure as a priestess in communion with Eir..." She staggered her way down to the ground.

"Please...Lady Eir, forgive my foolish acts..." she began to mumble, putting her hands together as she stared up at the ceiling.

This went way too far... It was my fault, but we were past the point of no return. I stood there, stupefied, as I watched her pray.

Just as it seemed like it would never end and the air was going to suffocate me, she suddenly fell silent. I couldn't hear her voice anymore. The mana in the air prickled at my senses, and the water elementals that were usually around had gone. Instead, holy mana filled the room.

"What *are* you doing, Mako?" Sophia asked affably. Her expression didn't match her usual aloof look though...and her eyes were glowing gold.

So...

"E-Eir?" I asked.

"Yup, that's me!" She winked, sticking her fingers up in a peace sign. She sure was playful...

"I can't let you get away with using *Charm* on my Sophie, though."

"I-I'm so sorry!" I yelled, dropping to my knees. "U-Um...can she not be a priestess anymore?" If so, I'd committed a capital offense.

However the reply Eir gave...was not one I'd expected. "Hmm, it doesn't really matter if a priestess is pure, you know?"

"What?!" I exclaimed. "It doesn't?" But Princess Noelle had said that was a requirement...

"That's just a rule humans came up with," stated Eir.

"It is? Why'd they come up with that?"

She laughed at my question. "Well, if a priestess gets a lover, the churches will have more to do, right? Plus if the guy behaved poorly, it'd reflect upon the church. Humans have it tough, huh?" Her tone was casual and seemingly unconcerned.

Well, I guess it really *didn't* concern her. It's not like the goddesses would care much about how human society worked.

"Anyway, that's how it is," said Eir. "You make sure you treat Sophia well! I'll let you do it!"

I...had her permission. Though, I suppose she'd given it a while ago.

"Oh, right. I need to warn you about something—your water magic mastery is high, so if you use *Synchro* with a water mage, it'll have side effects on them. Keep it low-key from now on!"

"Side effects?" I asked.

"It might be temporary, but the skill combines your mana with someone else's," she explained. "With your mastery level, mixing mana makes them feel *good*. This time, that side effect doubled up with your *Charm* skill...and that's how Sophie ended up kissing you."

S-So that's how it happened... I always used *Synchro* pretty freely with her.

After a moment of thought, I made a promise. "I'll be more careful." I'd definitely keep it in check next time.

"Glad to hear it, but that's not enough to make up for this mess! You made my cute little Sophie cry..."

"Urk."

Eir's grin looked like Noah's when she was scheming.

Rude!

"Oh, you were watching, Noah?" Eir asked.

What are you going to do to my Makoto?

"Hm, I figured I'd make him Sophie's fiancé. I mean, she's not getting anywhere any time soon."

Oh, that works. Good for you, Makoto. You've got the most influential fiancée in Roses.

"G-Goddess?!"

This wasn't how I'd expected things to go!

"Are you going to refuse? You know using *Charm* on a priestess calls for divine retribution, right?"

Are you a man or not? Take responsibility.

"U-Um... What about how Princess Sophia feels?" Wasn't that the most important thing here?

"Ah, no worries, no worries," said Eir. "I'll give her a revelation."

I'm pretty sure revelations aren't supposed to be handed out so lightly...

"Gimme a minute," she continued, "I'm going to talk to Sophie in her dreams."

As she spoke, Princess Sophia crumpled to the floor. I hurriedly caught her, but since I couldn't just hold her in my arms, I draped her across a nearby chair.

It took about fifteen minutes before she woke up.

Her eyes were blue as she blinked. Sophia was back all right.

She slowly looked my way. Neither of us spoke, but her cheeks grew pink as she stared at me.

The moment dragged on for a long while, so hesitantly, I broke the silence.

"Sophia...are you feeling all right?"

“I look forward to our partnership...” she murmured. “My fiancé...”

Apparently, Eir *had* filled her in.



A really awkward silence stifled the room.

Lucy was sullenly resting her cheek in her hand. Sasa was smiling for some reason and stroking the black cat on her lap.

When’d you get inside?

Princess Sophia looked even more expressionless than when we’d first met. It was how she looked when she was nervous.

The three beauties stared at me and I felt my stomach churn painfully.

On the side, Furiae eagerly asked if there was going to be a catfight.

Well, at least somebody is having fun.

So, how did this happen? It’d started five minutes ago...

“Um...Princess Sophia is actually my fiancée now...” I said, plunging the room into silence.

Lucy had just asked why Princess Sophia was here in addition to the normal four of us, and I’d explained. I’d known this would happen when I admitted it... But I couldn’t *not* say it.

“What do you mean?” asked Lucy. “I’m your girlfriend, right?”

“Takatsuki...you admitted that we’d felt the same way about each other since junior high,” said Sasa accusingly, “and then you do *this*?”

It felt like two straight fireballs were whizzing my way.

B-Be cool, I told myself.

Calm Mind was...at a normal level? No! I don’t get it!

N-Noah! Help!

Good luck!

Where's that divine guidance?!

"Hero Makoto, these two are your lovers?" Princess Sophia asked. Her expression hadn't changed, but her voice shook slightly.

"Yup."

"We are."

Lucy and Sasa's voices were like ice.

"I see... Of course the hero's companions are also his lovers..." she slumped.

I...hadn't mentioned it? Yeah, guess I hadn't.

"So, are you saying that since you're engaged to the princess, we're breaking up?" Lucy asked.

"Aww, so you're switching from commoners to a princess," said Sasa.

I didn't quite follow what either of them was saying. The princess and I looked at each other in surprise.

"Is that true?" I asked Sophia.

"N-No! I didn't say that at all!" Sophia cried, shaking her head.

"Oh, this isn't a 'Makoto is mine now!' thing?" asked Lucy.

"Yeah," added Sasa, "you're not going to give us a five-meter restraining order?"

Both of them seemed somewhat confused.

That's what they'd been imagining? Princess Sophia wouldn't do that stuff...at least, I didn't think so.

"How in the world do you see me?!" Sophia wailed.

"A coldhearted princess?"

"A villainess?"

"Hey," I interjected. Lucy and Sasa weren't being fair. Although I'd honestly agreed with them when I'd first met Sophia.

"A coldhearted...villainess..." The princess slumped.

Yup, they'd really gotten to her.

"So...we can just keep things like they were?" Lucy wondered.

"I don't mind as long as I can stay with Takatsuki..." Sasa said.

They didn't look entirely in agreement, but they were at least a lot calmer now. The atmosphere in the dining room was still awkward though.

"Hero Makoto..." Princess Sophia whispered into my ear. "Your companions have accepted me...right?"

"More or less..." I answered quietly. "Let's go with it, Sophia."

After a moment, Lucy broke the overall silence with a cold look and a question that addressed the elephant in the room. "So, why're you suddenly engaged? It came out of nowhere."

Princess Sophia answered her. "I became engaged with Hero Makoto due to a revelation."

"Revelation?" Sasa parroted.

"Something she was instructed to do by her goddess," explained Furiae. "It's possible for the priestesses."

Well, the final push *had* been that revelation, so she wasn't wrong per se...

"Oh? So the two of you don't have feelings for each other?" Sasa asked, apparently relieved.

"So, as a hero," Lucy clarified, "it's just his duty?"

Princess Sophia's eyebrow twitched.

"Heroes being engaged to priestesses is common and widely announced to relax the populace," drawled Furiae in a bored tone. "It happened in Highland too. It works to raise morale."

Maybe she was remembering Sakurai and Princess Noelle.

"Oh, a hero's duty. Oh well then."

"What was the point in all that shock, Lu?"

"You were angry too, Aya."

“Jeez, Makoto. You should have said that from the start.”

Apparently Lucy and Sasa had accepted it...at least, in terms of a political measure.

Phew, what a rel—

“That’s not right,” Princess Sophia muttered.

“What?” the other pair asked in unison.

“I-I love Hero Makoto!”

Everyone looked at her in shock.

“We even kissed so fiercely today...”

H-Hang on?! That was because of Charm.

“What?” Lucy and Sasa’s gazes slowly pivoted toward me.

They felt bloodthirsty!!! Even *Sense Danger* was going off!

“Oh... So you kissed Princess Sophia?” Lucy asked.

“Hmph, you’re just the same as Sakurai. Boys from second grade all work fast...”

They were terrifying. I thought I could hear Furiae muttering something about me being popular.

Enough from the peanut gallery!

Even the black cat seemed to recognize the danger and moved from Sasa to Furiae.

“Nrow, nrow.”

“Oh? You want my grilled fish?” asked Furiae. “You lowly kitten.” Still, she separated some from her plate and fed it to the cat.

Things were peaceful over on that side! *Come on, help me out here!*

“So, my knight? Which of the three do you like the most?”

“Furiae?!” I sputtered out.

Lucy, Sasa, and Sophia... All three of them stared at me. Then, the intensity of

their gazes seemed to combine.

“Makoto...”

“Takatsuki...”

“Hero Makoto...”

The three were boring holes into me with their eyes. They were actually moving closer to me, but by the time I realized, I was backed against the wall.

I looked between all three of their faces.

I have to pick one of them? I can't!

Who do you like the best?

Lucy

Aya

Sophia

Come on, *RPG Player*! Don't ask me things like that.

“I can't choose!”

I fell to my knees for the second time that day... I was pathetic. When I looked up hesitantly, I saw the three exchanging looks.

“What do we do?”

“We went too far...”

“Um... Princess Sophia. Since you're engaged now, are you going to have Takatsuki move to the capital?”

“No. We will be visiting Springrogue and Great Keith. We may be engaged, but that does not mean we will always be together... In fact, we may hardly be able to see one another at all...”

“I see... That's awful.” Lucy and Sasa's expressions had morphed into sympathy.

“Why not live here then?” Lucy suggested.

“Nice one, Lu.”

“Um, the two of you would be okay with that?” Princess Sophia asked timidly. “You don’t dislike me for suddenly appearing as his fiancée?”

“Well, if it’s because of a revelation, then there’s nothing we can do. Right, Aya?”

“Right. You kissed him, though. If you live in the same house he could come visit you at night expecting things.”

“Sasa,” I warned.

“Don’t worry. He doesn’t do anything even when he sees me naked,” Lucy said.

“Lucy,” I protested.

“That’s because you’re too free with it. Honestly, I’m sick of seeing you naked,” Sasa griped.

“Oh, you think I’m not charming enough? You didn’t have anything *there* when we bathed together. I guess you do have a kid’s chest.”

“Lu, you know it means war if you go further?”

“Hah! Bring it, Aya!”

“Lucy, Sasa, stop,” I demanded. We didn’t need an intra-party war!

“Um... Can I really live here?” Princess Sophia interjected cautiously.

“Hmm, Lucy, Sasa, Princess. Are you all okay with that?”

“I don’t mind,” Lucy replied.

“You can decide,” Sasa added, doing her usual and leaving it up to me.

“Whatever,” Furiae said. She didn’t speak her mind fully, so I wasn’t sure how she actually felt.

Still, everyone seemed to more or less agree.

At that, the princess cleared her throat and calmed down. “Then I shall be here until my duties call me next... Please, treat me well.”

And thus began a strange period of cohabitation.

◇ Sophia's Perspective ◇

I was now welcome at Hero Makoto's home.

Using communication magic, I informed my mother and father of the goddess's commandment to take the Hero of Roses as my fiancé. Eir's word was law in our nation, and not even my father—the king—could go against it. Though, with that said, my father *did* demand to know what kind of man Makoto was...and he also insisted that I bring my new fiancé to the capital.

Father...you already met him during the appointment ceremony...

They had barely talked though, so it was perhaps unsurprising that he didn't recall.

I also instructed Leo to return to Macallan once he'd concluded his visits to the nearby regions. Apparently, my brother had already planned to do just that—he wanted to meet with Makoto again. Leo was especially overjoyed when I said that Hero Makoto would be joining him on his sojourns to neighboring countries.

They would probably be departing within the next few days. When that happened, Hero Makoto and I would be separated once again.

That was likely for the best—I was a princess of Roses, so I could not spend too much time at my fiancé's home. I was at the church during the day and only retired to Makoto's house in the evening.

The Fujiwara company had provided all the necessities I would need to live in Macallan, and my knights were guarding the neighborhood. I'd told them to keep the fanfare to a minimum...but every one of them seemed to be present.

I'd need to talk with them later... Thankfully, the Fujiwara company was *also* providing food and simple lodging for the soldiers.

Truly, it is an outstanding business. Though, I suppose I should expect no less from a company headed by Hero Makoto's friend.

As I entered the house—my new home—Hero Makoto strolled up to me with a black cat on his shoulder. He must have just returned from his magic practice.

“Good work with your training, Hero Makoto.”

“Hey, Sophia,” he said in greeting. His usual expression was relaxed and composed, however, I could tell that he was currently in a good mood.

“Has something pleasant happened?” I asked.

“I think I was able to master the *Mana Blade* technique a bit more,” he replied happily. Even as he spoke, butterflies made of water fluttered around him.

“Perhaps you should take more of a brea—”

“Right,” he interrupted. “I’ll rest a bit after practicing a little longer.”

Now that I’m spending more time with him, it’s his dedication that surprises me the most...

His daily life started earlier than anyone else—each morning, he would wake up and offer prayers to his goddess. Then, he would begin training his magic. This level of diligence did not waver, even at the end of the day. Rather, Hero Makoto *kept* training...for longer than anyone else. In fact, I’d started to worry that this schedule might harm him.

I also fretted about how my own past comments might have influenced this behavior. On our first ever meeting, I had offhandedly told Hero Makoto (then known only as an apprentice mage) that he should train more.

Could this have caused him to adopt such a rigorous schedule?

However, when I’d voiced that concern to Lucy and Aya, they had simply laughed. Our interactions had grown much more familiar since I’d requested that the two of them speak casually with me.

“Princess Sophia,” Lucy had told me. “Makoto’s just naturally like that, so don’t worry about it.”

“Sophie...Takatsuki enjoys it,” Aya had added.

“He...does?” I’d asked

According to the two of them, his long hours of training were of his own volition.

I know nothing of my fiancé, I'd thought to myself.

Since there was such little time for us to spend together, I decided to learn what I could.

"L-Lucy?! That is a rather immodest outfit!" I yelled. She had come wandering from the bath wearing only a towel.

"Oh, it is? Makoto, why's Princess Sophia so shocked?"

"She's surprised by how little common sense you have," he answered with a sidelong look of exasperation. Even while carrying on a conversation, he kept up his magic practice.

"I get all sweaty when I'm just out of the bath," she explained, "so I don't want to put my clothes on right away."

"At least wear your underwear," Hero Makoto retorted as he handed them over to her.

"Hey! Quit just passing me my panties!"

"I always dry them, though."

"But it's embarrassing for you to touch them!" Lucy exclaimed.

"It is?" asked Hero Makoto

H-How can he be so calm?! Her undergarments might have been clean...but he'd just picked up a girl's underwear and passed them to her! Also, Lucy was *naked* under that towel!

"Y-You shouldn't show so much skin in front of men!" I told her.

"It's just Makoto, though," protested Lucy.

"That's not the problem!"

"Come on," Hero Makoto interrupted, "go get dressed."

"Ah! My towel's slipping..." whined Lucy before adopting a more playful tone. "Or...did you want to see?"

"A bit."

“Hero Makoto!” I chastised.

“You’re such a perv,” Lucy teased. Then she did something even more daring: she approached him from *behind* and wrapped her arms around him!

“Lucy...” Hero Makoto scoffed, “you’re dripping on me.”

“Come on, at least get a bit embarrassed.” She pouted for a moment before impishly kissing him on the cheek.

“Wha?!” I was shocked...but the other two women in the room seemed to be chatting like normal, as if nothing strange had happened.

“I’ll go get dressed,” Lucy declared. “Let’s train together later.” With that, she sauntered off.

I could have sworn that her towel was about to fall... And for some reason, Hero Makoto’s face hadn’t changed at all!

I felt dizzy. Was this how they always acted around one another?

“A-Aya! Why are you in Hero Makoto’s room?!” I exclaimed.

“To...hang out?”

“It’s already late! You shouldn’t be together like that until you’re married.”

“But we always do this.”

“Uh, you do...?”

While I was floundering, she slunk through the open door like a cat. I hesitated for just a moment before following her in.

Upon entering, I was treated to a bizarre sight.

“Water magic butterflies?” There were hundreds of them fluttering throughout the room. Feeling shocked, I glanced toward Makoto.

H-He’s controlling them all on his own?! Is he still training?!

“Oh, I thought you were missing, but here you are,” Aya cooed. “Twi, come hereee!”

“Sasa, is that supposed to be the cat’s name?” Hero Makoto asked as he

stroked the meowing cat's back.

"Yup," Aya replied. "Cute, right?"

"Why 'Twi'?"

"That 'nrow' is a trendy meow, so the cat's name is Twi-Tter. Twi for short!"

There was a pause.

"I propose a name change," Hero Makoto said flatly.

"Aww, it's too late now."

"Twi..." I mused, turning the name over in my mind. *What do they mean by it? Is Twi-Tter some phrase from their old world?*

The two of them continued chatting. Hero Makoto was simultaneously controlling hundreds of water butterflies. With no incantation. Without even looking.

Even I knew this was strange. And I finally understood something Leo had once said: *his mastery is far above the norm.*

"Sophia," said Hero Makoto, turning my way, "what's up?"

"Sorry to bother you while you are training," I apologized. Then I moved my focus to Aya. "We really shouldn't interrupt his—wait, why are you lying in his bed?!"

She just sighed in satisfaction. "It smells like him..."

Guh. Just what does it smell li—ah, what am I even thinking?!

"Sasa, sleep in your own bed tonight," Hero Makoto said.

"Hmm, if I feel like it."

"Wait a moment!" I interjected. "Explain that last statement." I was his fiancée, so I couldn't just let that pass.

"Sasa often just falls asleep in my bed when she's already there."

"Th-Then you lie with her and..." *Impossible! They shared a bed each night?!*

"I just sleep on the floor," he admitted.

“You *could* just sleep with me. I’d actually prefer that!” Aya exclaimed, grabbing his arm and pulling him into the bed.

“Wha—?!”

“Mrow?!”



Aya clung to him and Twi took refuge at the foot of the bed. "Come on, training all the time must be tiring. Take a breaaaak," she cajoled, holding his head to her chest and stroking his hair like he was the cat. "Here, have a hug."

H-How shameless... But, his face looks so relaxed...

"Mm, guess I'll stay like this," he said, though he just carried on with his magic practice.

Was this how he lived his day-to-day life?

I remembered Eir's words clearly.

"Mako's super dense, so you have to go hard."

"What in the world do you mean?" I asked. "Go...hard?"

"Hm, I guess just follow Lucy and Aya's lead. I mean, even I'm shocked that he reacts so little to so much. He's got an iron wall against Noah's temptations too."

I let out a sigh. She could tell me to tempt him, but that didn't make it easy.

"Mako's innocent," Eir explained, "so he might get corrupted by another woman if you don't make a move first."

"C-Corrupted...?"

"I'm sure you don't want to watch your beloved Mako getting chased by all those other women, right?"

I certainly did not!

"Then call this a revelation telling you to get close to him. 'Thou shalt build a relationship with Hero Makoto and save Roses.'"

All I could do was sigh again. Only the last half of that statement had sounded serious. She was right though... I didn't have much experience in love. But now, through my goddess's guidance, I was engaged to the man I had feelings for.

I decided to act.

“Hero Makoto?” Princess Sophia had shown up while I was practicing in my room. Her expression was cool and composed, but she did seem a little nervous.

“Oh, Sophia? Is it dinner time soon?” Guess she’d come to fetch me. I moved to get up and head to the dining room, but then...

The door shut behind her.

“Sophia?”

“Can I...sit next to you?” she asked, though she was seated before I could even answer.

She placed her left hand over my right. I felt my heart skip a beat. With no expression but a slight flush, she let her shoulder touch mine.

“Hero Makoto...”

“Sophia?”

We’d spoken simultaneously. However, before either of us could say any more, a voice amplified by wind magic sounded across the town. It came from the direction of the guild.

“All adventurers and soldiers in Macallan! Gather immediately at the western gate! A monster stampede has been spotted. Danger Level: Calamity - Town. I repeat...”

Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Faces Danger

“All adventurers and soldiers in Macallan! Gather immediately at the western gate! A monster stampede has been spotted. Danger Level: Calamity - Town. I repeat...”

At that announcement, both of our expressions changed.

“Sophia, I’m heading for the gate.”

“I will go to the church and manage the priests and clerics.”

“Can you look after Furiae too?”

“Very well. Take care, Hero Makoto.”

Once our short conversation was over, we both burst from the room.

“Princess! Go with Sophia!”

Furiae looked like she was about to say something but then just nodded.

“Very well.”

“Makoto, let’s go!”

“Let’s go, Takatsuki!”

I joined up with Lucy and Sasa and we headed for the west gate. The entire time, the announcement was repeating.

Calamity for a town.

That wasn’t uncommon for a place like Labyrinthos, where fierce monsters lurked in the lower levels. However, even *griffins* were rare in Macallan.

As I peered around, the townspeople seemed uneasy. Some folks shut themselves away in their homes while others headed to the church. The girls and I just bolted through the crowds until we reached the gate.

“Makoto! You made it!”

“Lucas!” I called back. *Phew! Macallan’s number one veteran is here!*

I also spied Brad the Ogre Slayer, Clark the Heavy Spear, Ian the Giant Killer, and Justin the Drunkard. Each of them was a veteran, and they all had aliases of their own.

This is great!

Another high-level adventurer—a particularly familiar one—soon ran over to me.

“Mister Takatsuki’h! There are far more monsters this time’h!” Nina exclaimed. Her ears stood on end and she stared gravely at me.

“How many are there?” There had been about five hundred last time, so I was guessing a thousand this time. Maybe two thousand...

“T-Ten thousand’h...”

I stared for a moment.

“Ten thousand?” I parroted.

Lucy and Sasa followed up my dull repetition with animated shock.

“Really?!”

“That’s too many!”

The gathered adventurers were all wearing the same types of expressions, and members of the younger generation looked pale.

Ten thousand? There had to be some kind of mistake! That was more than the whole town’s population!

“Don’t be so pessimistic, Makoto,” Lucas said, slapping me on the back of the head.

“Lucas! How many adventurers and soldiers do we have?”

“About three hundred.”

“What...?”

That was way too big a difference in firepower. We were doomed...

“I guess this is the first one for you young folks,” Lucas remarked. “You can’t fight a stampede head-on.” He looked at the amassed crowd and called out in a

booming voice, “Ground mages! Add walls around the gate to reinforce it!”

“Make sure people can still pass through,” another veteran instructed.

“We’ll take command,” Lucas said, turning back to me. “That good with you?”

“Of course, go for it.”

The younger adventurers—me included—were all shaken up, so the veterans provided a firm foundation for us.

“Aaaall riiight! Listen up!” Lucas called out. “Everyone, not just adventurers!”

The young adventurers, soldiers, and Temple Knights gathered around. I spotted Jean and Emily, but we couldn’t exactly stop for a chat in this situation. Our faces were all etched with tension.

“Okay! The most important thing is making sure the stampede can’t get in. Fortunately, Macallan has rather sturdy walls, but we need to use ground magic to reinforce them even further. Once that’s done, we’ll have our ranged attackers and archers positioned on the walls.”

Lucy was a mage who could use ranged attacks, so she followed the instructions and headed for the walls.

Oh, I’m a mage as well. Uuuh, apprentice mage...

“Makoto, what’re you doing?” Lucas asked.

“Because of my elemental magic, I can use long-ranged attacks now.”

“Oh, I see. So you’re with the mages.”

“What about me, Takatsuki?” Sasa asked.

Right, she was a close combatant. That was a tough one to answer...

“Aya, you stay at the gate,” instructed Lucas. “We’d prefer if you didn’t need to get involved, but us close combatants will be the last line of defense if the gate falls.” But then, Lucas pondered a moment. “Actually... Makoto’s a hero so he needs *someone* with him. Right! Aya, you should be perfect for that.”

He’d never seen Sasa fight, but he didn’t seem to doubt her strength. I guess it was that whole “takes one to know one” thing. I was honestly kinda jealous...

“Makoto, Aya, let’s head up on the walls,” said Lucas. “I’ll keep command of the rest.”

We followed him. The walls were several meters tall, and they had a path along the top that was wide enough for people to walk across.

The mages were already chanting. Lucy’s spells took a long time, so hopefully, they would be quick enough...

I glanced at Lucas and saw him glaring stoically beyond the walls.

“You’re calm, Lucas,” I remarked.

“Don’t be daft,” he countered. “Calamity-level stampedes are as rare as hen’s teeth. If this was any other town it would probably fall.”

As I looked at his face more closely, I could tell that this expression was the most serious I’d ever seen from him.

Suddenly, a flying scout dropped in with a report. “Lucas, the monsters are coming! The first wave will reach us within a minute.”

Turns out, it didn’t even take a minute—just a moment later, ten thousand monsters emerged from the forest. The stampede was so large that some were still hidden within the tree cover.

Goblins, kobolds, orcs, ogres, giants... More varieties than last time.

“Mages! At the ready!”

The mages I could see seemed like they were almost done with their chants. And...there was one among them that really drew the eyes.

“King rank magic...that must be Lucy.”

“She’s awesome.”

Lucy was wielding the staff the Grandsage had given her; it’d previously been used by the hero Johnnie Walker...who just so happened to be Lucy’s great-grandfather. She held the staff aloft—her eyes and hair glowed scarlet, seemingly reacting to her mana. That mana flowed from the staff, and it coiled around like a whirlpool as it climbed into the air.

Fire Magic: Phoenix.

Suddenly, a massive bird constructed of flames burst from the end of her staff. It was slightly unstable, but gradually, it grew bigger.

“Well, she’s definitely the Crimson Witch’s daughter,” I heard Lucas mutter.

I should get ready as well.

“Elementals,” I called out, readying Noah’s dagger. As the elementals merged with my blade, it began to glow blue. The condensed mana made the metal shimmer as if it were scorching hot.

I’d charged my blade.

According to Prince Leo, I could store enough mana in my dagger to produce spells on par with king rank magic.

Even so...

It’s no match for Lucy’s abilities, huh?

I glanced over at the ever-growing phoenix. She was like a bottomless well of mana.

Soon, the mages ceased their chants. The monsters plowed on, getting to within fifty meters of the walls.

“Fire!!!” Lucas yelled, signaling everyone to launch their spells as one.

Water Magic Sword Technique: Water Dragon’s Talon!

I released all of the mana within my dagger in a massive wave. With Lucy’s enormous bird of fire leading the way, a surge of destruction smashed into the stampede’s forerunners. There was a roar of explosions as the spells kicked up dust, and I was half worried that the cacophony had burst my eardrums. Even the earth beneath us shook from the impact.

Once the dust cleared, we could see around a thousand monsters dead on the ground—burned, crushed, and sliced. It was a success as far as a preemptive strike went, but...

“We only managed to kill about a thousand of them...” Lucas’s voice was bitter.

New monsters soon scurried over the corpses of the first wave.

“Next spells! Prioritize fliers!”

I could see the odd griffin and wyvern heading toward us, and the mages swiftly started taking them down.

“Firestorm!”

“Thunderbolt!”

“Blizzard!”

“Rockfall!”

Magic rained incessantly on the swarming monsters, killing hundreds more. Yet...it didn't make the oncoming force falter. Was there no end to them?

“Lucas...” said one of the veterans. “Something's wrong.”

“Yeah. Things should be easing off now...”

“This ain't good... Some of the mages are starting to run outta steam.”

“Use your items and refill your mana!” barked another of the veterans. “The guild will pay for them!” Apparently, some of the younger mages had been hesitant to use their expensive items.

In my case...I didn't need a mana refill. However, as I kept up with the elemental magic, it grew continuously weaker.

It's probably because of the warlike atmosphere... Water elementals preferred peace, so they would often shun blood-soaked battlefields like this.

The magic was still coming...but only from Lucy. As for the other mages, they were all out of mana.

“So we killed around two thousand with magic...”

“That would normally be fine.”

There were still around eight thousand monsters surviving. They'd been largely blown back into the trees by the initial salvo.

From deeper into the forest, more of them pressed forward.

There's something weird about that...

Things just felt *off*.

“Takatsuki!” yelled Sasa. “Didn’t you already kill that wyvern?!”

“I know I took that giant down!” another adventurer exclaimed.

“That big ogre too! I hit it dead-on!”

“Are they...resurrecting?”

“That’s impossible...”

Just then, a deep roar shook the air, cutting across those voices. A large black figure had appeared above the treetops. It was still a good distance away from us.

Clairvoyance.

Using my skill, I saw the figure clearly.

A black dragon?

It controlled enormous and dense reserves of mana...so much that the power surrounding the beast caused the very air to waver.

“It’s an ancient dragon! It’s resurrecting them!”

“Don’t be stupid! We wouldn’t get one of those around here!”

“Lucas! You’ve fought one before... Is it actually an ancient dragon?!”

The veterans were all shaken—this was the first time I’d seen them lose their cool.

“I fought one in the depths of Labyrinthos,” answered Lucas, “and I’ve fought others...but that’s a *sky* dragon. I’ve never seen one before...”

“But it *is* an ancient dragon?”

“Probably...”

“Fuck! So it caused the stampede?”

“I don’t know,” replied Lucas, “but it probably has something to do with it.”

“You’ve got to be kidding... You’d need to be an orichalcum rank adventurer to even think of going against it.”

The adventurers as a whole were growing uneasy.

“Meteo Rain!” Lucy yelled. I’d lost count of how many times she’d cast it today. Her shoulders were heaving and she looked exhausted.

Is she okay? I ran over to her, worried.

“Lucy, take a break,” I called out once I was close enough to be heard. “Everyone’s refilling on mana now.”

“I’m...fine...” she managed through ragged breaths. “I’ve still got...loads...of mana...”

Even if her mana held out, she probably couldn’t focus for much longer—her hand was shaking on her staff.

I glanced out of the city and saw that the monster horde was still coming this way. However, the magical bombardment had stopped, and Lucas’s face was drawn.

It’s just a matter of time before they reach the gate...

Suddenly, a griffin wheeling through the sky dove down...heading straight for Lucy.

“Lucy!” I shouted. “Get out of the way!”

“Get away from Lu!” Sasa yelled, rushing her way. Sasa reared back and blasted the griffin away with her hammer...but not before the monster tore its claws into Lucy’s body.

“Ahhhhh!” Lucy screamed, her balance faltering.

She tumbled from the wall.

“Lucy!!!”

Jump after Lucy and sav—



I caught a glance of an *RPG Player* choice popping up, but I ignored it and leaped from the wall. Wrapping myself in a cloak of mana, I prepared for the shock.

A moment later, we both hit the ground, and my whole body was racked with intense pain. *Calm Mind* was the only reason I didn't pass out. I could taste blood, and everything ached.

"Lucy...you okay?" I mumbled.

She chuckled wanly. "I messed up. Why do the griffins always go for me?"

Blood was gushing down her shoulder and arm.

"Wait a minute," I said, moving to use regeneration items on her.

"Ma...ko...to... Behind..."

As Lucy spoke, *RPG Player* displayed the ogres stampeding toward us.

I'm busy, damn it! Water Dragon's Talon!

I didn't turn around, just swung my mana-filled dagger. The force of my blow launched the ogres away. However, there was no more mana left in my blade.

The healing items had so far stopped Lucy's bleeding, but her wounds were still raw. I kept on using them, but the repair work was slow.

I need stronger healing!

"Takatsuki!" Sasa shouted. "Is Lu all right?!"

She'd defeated the griffin and had then leaped down to us. The impact of her landing had launched away the other monsters in the area.

"She's stopped bleeding!" I cried.

But she wasn't *healed*. As time went on, the monsters were getting closer and closer. Before long, we'd end up overrun.

"Get the hell away!"

Sasa was fighting on her own, but there were monsters coming from more than one direction.

Elemental magic...isn't an option right now. There aren't enough elementals here... I had no mana left, but I couldn't just leave Lucy. Readying my dagger, I accepted the fact that I'd need to fight.

But then...

“Obey me, you base beasts!”

A voice echoed across the area. It sounded almost like a chiming bell, and the tone clashed with the atmosphere of battle.

What? The monsters are suddenly attacking each other?!

I looked up and saw a beautiful dark-haired girl standing between us and the horde.

“Princess!” I called out. “What’re you doing here?!” Furiae was supposed to be with Princess Sophia.

“She has finished guiding the townspeople and is taking care of the wounded!” replied Furiae. “I cannot help with that, and I had a bad feeling about this attack, so I came here.”

“Thanks...” I responded after a moment. “You really saved us.” I was supposed to be her Guardian Knight...but she was the one protecting me. Furiae could see the future with her *Fate Magic* skill. She’d apparently followed her “bad feeling” and had come to help us.

For the time being, Sasa and Furiae had drawn the monsters off us.

Now I just needed to get us back up the wall. I was looking for the opportune moment to do so when an aura-covered sword fell through the air and sliced up the nearest monsters.

“Dragon Cutter!”

The warrior shouldering the hefty sword stood between us and the monsters, continuously rending any that dared to get close.

“Makoto, take Lucy and get back into the town,” he commanded.

“Lucas!” I yelled. “Why’d you jump down?!” Yet even as I asked that, I saw other close combatants leaping into the fray.

Lucas instantly took charge and issued commands to the other warriors. “It’s an all-out battle! Listen up! Gold and above will face the ancient dragon. Silver and below protect the town with the soldiers! Mages—you’ll serve as reinforcements once your mana is back! Get the wounded inside the walls!”

“Can you...win?” I asked hesitantly.

The term “ancient” denoted a dragon that had lived for over a thousand years. Dragons were seen as the strongest creatures in the land, and ancient dragons were even stronger. Even skilled adventurers rarely came across them. And when they did, it became the basis of a tale around the pub table.

Of course, that required the adventurer to survive the encounter...

“It might be tough this time...” he admitted, frowning.

“L-Lucas?” I was shocked by his hesitant answer. He always claimed that he could at least *manage* against any monster.

Didn't you regale us all with this kind of story in the taverns?!

“I fought against one in the depths of Labyrinthos,” explained Lucas. “We had a party of more than ten mythril and platinum rank adventurers. Over half of us died. Those of us that lived did so only by chance. Makoto, you're a hero, so you need to prioritize your own safety.”

“But...”

He didn't listen to my objection, just continued giving orders to the other adventurers. Before long, the impromptu dragonslaying party had been formed.

“Mister Takatsuki'h. Look after my husband'h.”

“N-Nina?”

I hadn't noticed her come down from the wall. However, what she'd said was more important than that.

“I'm a gold rank'h,” she continued. “I'll help the team against that ancient dragon'h.”

“I thought you'd retired?!” It was nearly time for her wedding!

“If we don't take it down, Macallan will fall'h. I need to help'h.” Her smile was the usual bright grin that she always gave us.

Not wasting any time, Macallan's veterans headed out.

This group had once given me that stupid nickname...had mocked me for how weak I was despite being an otherworlder...had always taken any excuse to

throw a rowdy celebration...

And now, I could only see them as warriors marching to their deaths.

Deaths I couldn't prevent.

No...

Soon, the party vanished into the trees.

Their plan was to go around the stampede and face the ancient dragon while using the trees of the forest as coverage.

And when they get there...

It would be a fierce battle. The dragon was probably the cause and leader of the stampede—powerful monsters likely guarded it, so the veterans would have to deal with them *plus* the ancient dragon.

Could they even win?

Lucas had said that they probably wouldn't all survive.

However, his moniker was "the dragonslayer," so he might manage a draw. That was his strategy at least. Well, strategy wasn't really the word for it... This plan was more like a suicide run.

I glanced around and saw charred monster corpses collapsed in the dust on the ground.

Water elementals preferred peace, so there were none in sight. My magic wouldn't be of any use... *I*, a *hero*, wouldn't be of any use.

The End.

I could feel the game over credits scrolling through my mind.

Desperate, I yelled out for Undyne in the language of the elementals. She should just help me already!

She didn't appear, though.

Sasa was smacking at giants with a similarly giant hammer.

Furiae was struggling to *Charm* a group of dire wolves.

The other silver ranks had their backs to the wall, barely coping...

At this rate, we won't last long either...

If it hadn't been for *Calm Mind*, I wouldn't have been able to think as I continued to support Lucy.

Do I have any other options?

Then, as if to answer the question, words floated in the air before me.

Who will you *Synchro* with?

Furiae

Lucy

Huh?

The familiar letters of *RPG Player* choices were displayed in front of me, but the options weren't the usual Yes or No. The skill was giving me a suggestion, almost hurrying me along.

What on earth...?

No! There was no time to think about it now. I just needed to make the choice.

Who to pick?

Furiae? I could use spells or curses.

Charm would be a great tool to drum up a little friendly fire among the monster horde...but I didn't think I could control their attacks so precisely. Besides, *Moon Magic* skills were stronger at night, not at this time of day.

In which case...

"Lucy, let me *Synchro* with you," I said. "I'm sorry to ask while you're hurt..."

"It's fine... But you might get burned again..."

"I should be all right."

According to Noah, Lucy and I had a love contract, so the synchronization should be easier... Of course, *should* was the operative word here.

“So if we’re *Synchroing*, we need to do this, right?”

“Wha?”

Lucy wore a pained smile as she put her uninjured arm around my neck.

“Lucy, don’t move while you’re hurt, you’ll—” I tried to say, “You’ll make it worse,” but couldn’t get it out.

“Mmh.”

Because she kissed me.

My vision went red, filled with light of the same color.

It was like that time with the giant—the first time I ever saw the elementals. No...this flood of light was even stronger. Everything I could see was covered in fire elementals.

What is this...? Wait, you know! Just remember...

“Fire elementals love battles and festivals.”

That’s it! Thanks, My First Elemanti!

When I’d first read that, I remembered thinking that the author might’ve been exaggerating a bit. But, since fire elementals had nothing to do with me, I’d forgotten all about it.

Right now though, I was in the midst of carnage—a battle, in other words.

And the fire elementals loved it.

“Hot! xxxxx Hey, back off a bit!” The ones close by made me feel like I was on fire, so I hurriedly warned them. Maybe this was why I’d gotten burned last time...

It had nothing to do with your demon blood, Lucy.

“Makoto...?” Lucy broke the kiss and peered at me strangely.

“xxxxx, xxxxxxxxxxxx Fire elementals, lend me your strength.”

“xxx! Sure!” they chorused.

“Takatsuki, Fuu and I are fighting for our lives here,” Sasa griped. “What are you playing at?”

“My knight!” snapped Furiae. “Get your head out of the gutter!”

Ack, they’d seen Lucy and me...

“Sasa! I’m going to blast the monsters away, so clear everyone out!”

“Jeez! Fine!” She sighed in frustration but then shouted, “Everyone! Takatsuki’s going to attack the monsters, so get back!!!” She didn’t have any voice amplification magic, but her command seemed to make the trees shake.

Nice one, Sasa! Right, my turn!

First, I tightened my grip on Lucy’s hand. I was planning to use the basic *Fire Magic: Fireball*. It was so simple any mage could cast it.

However, with the unlimited mana from the fire elementals...

◇ Furiae’s Perspective ◇

“What in the...?”

I stared up, feeling dazed by what I was seeing.

A massive fireball was swallowing up the entire sky.

The monsters panicked, and even the adventurers were looking dumbstruck.

“Get inside the walls! Make sure no one is left behind!” yelled the warrior. All around us, adventurers started fleeing.

Though the monsters tried to give chase, rapid fireballs began to pelt at their lines, and those fireballs that hit the ground sprouted into pillars of flame.

And it wasn’t just in one place—all around us, in every spot where adventurers were being chased, the land was scorched by fire. It was a ridiculous display of precision and observation.

And controlling it all...

“Hey, Sasa! Nina and the others went to the left, right?”

“Yeah! You should be able to attack the ones on the right.”

“Got it,” my knight confirmed before launching hundreds of fireballs. Each one struck members of the monster swarm, and every ensuing blast created another pillar of fire. Countless monsters pitifully roared their last, engulfed by

the inferno.

It must have been like a literal hell for them.

To me, though, the sight was beautiful. This magic was controlled to the finest degree—it was gorgeous.

Suddenly, a large shadow flew above us.

“Takatsuki! Green dragon!”

“Guh, again?” he complained. He had certainly struggled with the green dragon last time.

“*Fireball*,” he muttered. With that one word, hundreds of them cascaded toward the dragon. It managed one pitiful roar of despair before falling to the ground.

Uh? That’s it?

“Wow, Takatsuki! You roasted it!” the warrior applauded.

So a green dragon had been nothing to worry about...

An adventurer soon ran up to my knight. “Makoto! The rest of the adventurers and soldiers are evacuated!”

“Gotcha,” my knight replied. “Then it’s time for me to finish these things off.”

He raised his dagger, murmuring something inaudible.

Mana bubbled up around him like magma, pooling and growing.

One of the mages screamed.

Well, I understand the urge. After all, I was barely a moon magic user. The crazed amount of mana coiling around my knight made me shudder.

How can he even stand in the middle of that?

The mana already in the air grew in leaps and bounds. I doubted that even hundreds of high-ranking mages combined could imitate it. And yet...all of this was being done by a single person. My knight was controlling that insane mana. And he was smiling, obviously enjoying himself.

He waved a hand like a conductor in front of an orchestra.

Fire Magic: Flame Squall, I heard him say.

There was no such spell—it was something he'd invented on the spot.

Fireballs shot through the air, roaring almost like a crashing waterfall as they swallowed up the monsters. The beasts screeched and ran, but pillars of flames blocked their escape.

This must've been what those otherworlders would call "hell on earth."

I gazed at my knight as he joyously manipulated the magic.

With *Fate Magic (King Rank)* I could see the threads of fate. The more influential a person was, the more threads would be connected to them. Royals, nobles, and heroes usually had so many that I could see their influence.

But the Hero of Roses?

He had none. I could not see a single thread connected to him. That was why, at first, I'd taken him for a weak, inconsequential person.

I'd been wrong though.

Makoto Takatsuki was well-liked by that warrior and mage, and even the Princess of Roses. And yet, despite that, I could see nothing.

His future was obscured to me.

I'd been curious about this person who my powers did not affect. *Perhaps he's hiding some terrific power of his own*, I'd thought.

That's why I'd suggested that he become my guardian knight.

Yet even afterward, I hadn't been able to see his fate. He didn't hide anything—he was just a dedicated hero that enjoyed his training.

The girls he called friends were good people. They paid no mind to my cursed status.

The town of Macallan was a wonderful place as well. It was pleasant. However, my magic showed me a future where the town fell.

It was a small, rural settlement...and the stampede was beyond them.

My future sight wasn't absolute, though.

I couldn't let Macallan be overrun without doing anything. At first, I couldn't think of anything *to* do, but I knew I had to do *something*.

So, I'd mustered my courage and had come out onto the battlefield.

This...is too much...

However, just as things had seemed beyond hope, a single apprentice mage had blasted everything away...including the future I'd seen.

The stampede pressing down on Macallan burned away until not even ashes remained.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

Ten thousand monsters...and we'd slain every last one.

I released the *Synchro* with Lucy and then let out a sigh. "Man, I'm exhausted..." This'd been a close one...a really close one.

"Well done, Takatsuki," Sasa said, chuckling.

"My knight, that was...incredible," Furiae added.

Both of them wore tired smiles of their own. They'd really yanked us out of the fire back there. Still, the fourth member of our party, Lucy, had definitely pulled the most weight.

"Thanks, Lucy," I told her. "We need to get you patched up now. Let's find someone with healing magic."

"Y-Yeah... Say, Makoto, you don't have a *Fire Magic* skill, do you? How could you cast it?"

"Huh?" I was worried about her wounds, but apparently, she was more interested in my magic. "Um, the basics are the same as with *Water Magic* skills. I guess I get a temporary *Fire Magic* skill when I use *Synchro* with you?"

Though, honestly, I didn't quite understand the logic. I'd have to ask Noah about it at some point.

"That's got to be unfair," Furiae interjected.

"Well, it *was* harder to control than water magic," I explained. "It felt like my mastery had dropped by about a hundred."

“And what is your mastery now, out of interest?” asked Lucy.

“About two-sixty? Maybe a bit higher.”

Furiae and Lucy just looked silently at me.

What’s with those faces, guys?

Just then, I heard someone call out to us. “Makoto! Lucy!”

Oh, nice timing. It was Emily, a cleric who had the skills to repair injuries.

“Emily, Lucy’s hurt. Can you please heal her?”

“You can count on me!” Emily began chanting a spell, and Lucy’s wounds started to close.

Phew, she should be fine. Now we just needed to take out that ancient dragon.

“Sasa, let’s go find Nina and—”

Hold on, Makoto! interrupted Noah in my mind.

At the same time, Furiae said, “Wait, my knight!” She seemed to have the same reservations as the goddess.

“Hm?”

Don’t even think about it! exclaimed Noah. *That dragon’s ancient...even for an ancient monster. It’s over two thousand years old! There’s no way you can win.*

“You can’t fight an ancient dragon. It’s an embodiment of ruin...” Furiae trailed off, seeming to ponder something. “Though, I suppose *you* might be fine...”

Noah’s mental voice was deadly serious, but Furiae’s conviction seemed to falter as she spoke.

Noah, can the *others* win against it?

I know it’s hard, Makoto, but there are things you just have to accept...

“Right!” I’d made up my mind. “Let’s go, Sasa!”

Hey! griped Noah.

Nope, no “accepting” here.

“To Nina, yeah?” asked Sasa.

“Yup, we’ll knock down the ancient dragon!”

You can’t!

“You don’t know until you try,” I said aloud.

“Takatsuki, who are you talking to?” Sasa wondered.

“My goddess. Princess, wait here.”

Furiae seemed worried, but she acquiesced. “R-Right...”

Lucy gave us a pained smile. “Makoto! Take care!”

Both of them watched us head toward the forest.

Sasa and I passed the remnants of monsters as we ran through the forest. Actually, let me correct that—we raced through the scorched field that *used* to be trees... Our final destination was the ancient dragon.

“I hope Lucas and the others are okay,” I said.

“They’re all veterans, right? I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

I hoped so too, but I really was worried about them.

Makoto, listen... my goddess said seriously.

“What is it, Noah?”

You and Aya can’t win against the ancient dragon as you are now. Retreat.

“Everyone else is fighting,” I argued, “so we can’t just run away.”

“What did she say?” asked Sasa.

“That we can’t win against it... Sasa, I’m sorry for making you come this far. If you turn back—”

That was as far as I got before Sasa painfully pinched my cheek. “What stupidity were you in the middle of spouting off?” she trilled.

“Sorry, never mind.” *Guess I shouldn’t bother.*

If the worst came to pass, Sasa had her extra lives. She was much more likely

to survive than me.

Please, Makoto, run away... implored Noah.

“Not happening.” Lucas and Nina were in the middle of a fight—I wasn’t going to turn tail and run.

You stubborn fool.

“I’m not giving up on this.”

She *was* being awfully persistent about it, though. Was it really that dangerous?

“Do you have a plan?” Sasa asked worriedly.

She’d already made it clear that she wasn’t going to turn back, but I suppose a goddess’s dire warning against challenging the dragon seemed pretty heavy.

Welp, I had only one recourse here. There had to be some benefit to following my goddess with zero believers.

“Noah, please help.”

After a long pause, I heard her say, *What...?*

“Your single believer is about to die, so please aid him.”

Entreating the gods was tradition since time immemorial, even back in Japan.

Hmmm... So that’s how you’re playing it...

My serious plea was definitely worth a shot. So, what would she do?

Silence.

Huh. Well, if she didn’t have any ideas, then I’d have to think of one on my own.

Maybe I should ask *RPG Player* for a choice... Or what about Undyne? Yeah...she’s not going to help.

What else was there... Hmmmm...

There is an option... Noah said with some hesitation.

Oh?

I really didn't want to teach it to you though...

"You've got an idea?!"

It's a dangerous technique. This is the only time you can use it.

"I'll...keep that in mind."

Listen here you little br—

"I'm just kidding," I assured her. "So, what is it?"

Urgh, I really don't wanna...

She seemed *extremely* unhappy about it. Reluctantly, she started to explain the technique.

The jet-black ancient dragon loomed ahead of us. Several other dragons surrounded it. Some familiar veterans were facing off against it, with Lucas in the center of the formation. I could see Nina and the others struggling against even the lesser dragons.

"Lucas!" I called out.

"Makoto?! You idiot! Why're you here?!"

Lucas was yelling at me, but I ignored it. I could hardly just abandon them all!

"Sasa, go help with the other dragons!"

"Got it! You take care!"

The ancient dragon was one thing, but the adventurers facing off against the normal dragons needed support as well. Several veterans were already on the ground.

Sasa whipped her Fierce Deity's Hammer into a nearby dragon and sent it flying. *Nice!* The dull thud of the hammer smacking into the dragon's skull even sent its eyes spinning. *Wow.*

Now, time to defeat the ancient dragon. I moved closer to Lucas and saw that he was covered in wounds. His armor and weapons had been thoroughly beaten up, and his body was soaked in blood and grime.

“Makoto, you need to know that none of our attacks, not even mine, are doing anything to it. We’re in a bad position here.” Lucas’s expression was exhausted... Even his voice sounded hopeless. The other veterans didn’t appear like they’d given up, but none of them looked positive.

I stared down the ancient dragon and leveled Noah’s dagger at it.

“Another Foolish Insect Arrives...” it rumbled.

It can speak?! The voice was low and almost overpowering.

“Takatsuki! It talked!” Sasa should’ve been focused on her own fight, but she’d still found the time to commentate!

“Ah...yeah,” I murmured. Though, really, didn’t she *also* count as a talking monster?

The ancient dragon’s dark scales were slightly marred, presumably by the veterans’ attacks, but the monster as a whole looked undamaged. On the other hand, the adventurers were all barely hanging on.

“You’ve got a plan, then?” Lucas asked.

“Well...I have a secret technique I can use.”

“Got it. Shall we buy you time?”

I was shocked by that. “You’re...not going to ask?”

“If you think we can win, I’ll believe you,” he declared with a grin. The other adventurers seemed to agree. “After all, you’re Makoto the Full Clearer.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know? It’s your alias. Mary realized it when she was going through the paperwork on the quests. You’re the only adventurer that has a hundred percent success rate.”

“Well, ninety percent of them were goblin hunts.”

“Right...well, you’ve also got the nickname ‘Goblin Cleaner’ I guess.”

“That’s the only one I knew I had,” I admitted. Apparently, I’d been given another moniker without even knowing it.

Before us, the dragon roared and flapped its wings. The ensuing blast of wind sheared and completely stripped the leaves from the trees. *Is it...waiting for us?* No, definitely not. The wounds that the veterans had managed to inflict were already gone.

It can heal itself? Honestly, what a pain...

“Go! Cover Makoto!” bellowed Lucas.

“Aye!” the veterans roared in unison.

As one, they all converged on the dragon. Lucas’s sword was covered in aura as he swung it, and the mages joined in with high rank spells. *Not that those have done much...*

We wouldn’t bring it down at this rate—Lucas was the only one that had done any visible damage. Even the ancient dragon seemed to only be focusing on him, since everyone else’s attacks seemed pretty much ineffectual.

I tightened my grip on the dagger, which was still infused with power from the fire elementals—some mana lingered there from when I’d been connected with Lucy.

There was no recharging my blade. I had only one chance.

Right...

I followed Noah’s instructions, pressing my palm into the blade. The edge sliced through the skin and my blood welled up around the metal. It hurt, but I ignored the pain. As the dagger absorbed the blood, it began to glow dully.

I offer this to you, Noah.

Instantly, I felt *something* vanish from within me, and the dagger’s glow grew ominous. My body felt like lead.

So this is anima...

I wrapped my hands together around the dagger and prayed hard to the goddess I believed in.



Makoto... Offer your body and soul to me through that regalia.

Judging by her tone of voice, she was far from happy as she explained it.

“Uh, and what happens then?” I asked. I, on the other hand, was excited by the prospect. It felt a bit like learning a rare skill!

It’s a technique where you make a sacrifice to the gods... Humans call it Suicide Magic...

“*Suicide Magic?!* ” That was what the Snake Sect had used in Highland. From what I remembered, it used your life force instead of mana...

Wait.

“Won’t that...kill me?”

You’ll die either way if you fight it head-on.

“Can’t I use magic from the fire spirits to win instead?” I asked, glancing at the dagger.

Not going to happen. Your sword skills are too basic. A swarm of lesser monsters is one thing...but that won’t work against the ancient dragon.

“So when I use this sacrificial technique—*Suicide Magic*—what happens?”

I lend you power in exchange for your life force... Though I don’t want to.

“Why?”

Hey, listen up! I want you to be strong and live a long life! You’re the last person I’d want to teach this technique to. Knowing you, you’ll use it like it’s going out of style!

Well, honestly...I’d probably get a lot of use out of it. That is, if it seemed practical.

No. Not happening!

I’d be careful about using it...

No!!! Do. You. Understand?!

And so, I made my promise to Noah and gained new strength.



“Noah, please bestow your grace upon your lowly disciple.”

Under the dominion of my name, Goddess Noah—argh, nonono!

Uh, Noah? I'm really asking here.

I hate sacrifices...they go against the natural order.

Come on, it's for your cute little believer.

Fine... Under the dominion of my name, Goddess Noah...

She took a quick breath before continuing. *I accept your blood and soul, and in turn, grant you a momentary miracle.*

Before my eyes, the regalia seemed to warp. Noah's dagger was enveloped not in mana, but...in something that felt wholly unnatural. Simply looking at it made my heart lurch, and I felt like I could hear countless shrieks. From my blade, I could sense something hateful staring back at me.

It was a chaotic, ineffable fear... I looked away. Best not to stare at it anymore.

"Lucas, I'm ready!"

"Got it! Guys, scatter!"

At his call, everyone backed away from the ancient dragon. I readied my dagger and looked the beast in the eyes.



“Pitiful Insect... You Shall Perish With The Country Of Roses.”

Hm? It wants to destroy Roses? Was this what had triggered Eir’s prophecy?

Then...this seemed perfect. I softly swung the dagger clad in anima and the flames of mana.

Goddess’s Miracle: God Slaying Blade.

A prismatic slash ripped its way through the air toward the ancient dragon. The wave of power was, by no means, traveling swiftly.

“Pitiful...” grumbled the ancient dragon. It didn’t seem to sense any threat coming from my attack.

“It’s no good...” Lucas murmured, and all of the veterans looked downcast.

However, none of them realized that this spell was the embodiment of a prayer...the embodiment of a miracle. It combined a certain type of strike *and* a divine attack.

The strike...well, I’d seen it once before, back when that divine magicite giant from the dungeon had attacked Nina. The speed of this attack was irrelevant—Noah’s miracle would *ensure* that it hit.

As for the *divine* part...

Noah had told me that the materials composing this dagger had been used during Titanomachy. Therefore, her blade could kill even a god, and this miracle was bestowed upon it through magic.

My slash attack was engulfed in that repulsive anima as it slowly approached the ancient dragon. The monster casually dodged it...or so it seemed.

“I Am Beholden To The Dragon King Astaroth,” roared the dragon, assuming that my strike had blown right past it. “Your Petty Human Attacks—”

That was where its scoff halted.

My attack hit.

The slash tore through its body, ripping flesh and sinew to ribbons. The remnants fell from the sky and landed heavily on the ground. Then, the ominous light dissipated from my blade.

I swayed, half collapsing, and had to support myself with a hand on the ground.

It felt like...I'd just lost all of my life force.

So this is Suicide Magic...

Literally everyone was staring at me in disbelief...even the other dragons. Sasa quickly noticed and pointed her *Menace* skill at the remaining monsters.

"You want him to do the same to you?!" she yelled.

Menace seemed to do the trick—the rest of them fled in a panic.

So it's over...

I fell to my knees.

"Takatsuki!" Sasa cried, supporting my limp body. Somehow, I stayed conscious.

"Makoto..." Lucas murmured. "Was that...? No, never mind. You saved us. Let's return to town."

Judging by the look on his face, I thought he might've realized what I'd done...that I'd used forbidden *Suicide Magic*.

"Someone's there'h!" Nina suddenly burst into the trees and dragged out a woman wearing robes.

"L-Let me go!" the woman screeched. She had snakes tattooed on her face, and horns growing from her head. Was she a...cambion?

"What do we do with her'h?"

"Take her to the guild or hand her over to the temple," Lucas ordered. "She might be involved with the stampede."

"So the cambions were behind this?"

The veterans didn't seem surprised—they were discussing it calmly. Personally, I'd had a bad time with the Snake Sect, and I *really* didn't want to see them again.

That group was evil, through and through...

Suddenly, blackness began creeping around the edges of my vision... It seemed like this was about it for me.

“Takatsuki?” Sasa asked.

“Sorry, Sasa,” I mumbled. “I’m just gonna nap.”

I lost consciousness.

When I awoke, it was to Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae.

“Makoto, are you okay?”

“You woke up!”

“My knight...that was reckless.”

The three of them must’ve been looking after me.

“Sorry for worrying you. I’ll get up now.” I’d been passed out in the guild hall, which wasn’t unusual for me. I wasn’t quite steady on my feet, but I didn’t feel like sleeping anymore, so I stumbled to the guild’s entrance.

The guild’s tavern was in the midst of a celebration. After all, they *had* protected the town from over ten thousand monsters. And it wasn’t just guild members there—I could see soldiers, Temple Knights, and merchants like Fujiyan.

The whole town was triumphant. Even people who didn’t fit inside the guild were partying just outside the entrance.

Why not? I decided to join in as well.

Some time passed, and all sorts of people came over to greet me. A lot of them had apparently been waiting for me to wake up—they all wanted to thank me.

Once the commotion died down, I found a seat and watched the rest of the party.

Lucy was surrounded by some newer adventurers. They’d been impressed at her continued effort to sling Meteos, even while they’d been all out of mana.

“How can I be like you?!”

“Please, teach me magic!”

The bronze rank adventurers all had shining eyes as they crowded around her. *She’s popular, huh?*

As for Sasa...

“That *Menace* was incredible,” gushed one adventurer. “The dragons had their tails ’tween their legs!”

“Aya! What rank’re you?”

“Uh, stone rank, I think?”

The veterans around her were all gobsmacked that she was only stone rank. Well, she *did* send those dragons on the run with *Menace* alone...

I was currently seated at a table with Furiae, Mary, Nina, Fujiyan, and Chris. When I’d first arrived, a whole bunch of adventurers had surrounded me—they’d been chattering and asking me about the *Fire Magic* spell I’d used while *Synchro*’d with Lucy. However, Chris was at our table, so the swarm of adventurers had dispersed. Since she was to be the next ruler of the region, her status dictated that not just anyone could stroll up and talk to us.

Oh, right! Chris had managed to cement her succession!

It seemed like everything had gone our way. We celebrated Macallan’s safety and Fujiyan’s wife’s success.

Huh...?

A beautiful dark-haired girl had slipped away during the tumult. It was Furiae, and upon glancing at her face, I realized that she seemed slightly down. She was the Priestess of the Moon, and she’d come rushing to aid Lucy and me during our time of need. I was worried about her wandering behavior and that lonely look on her face, so I followed after her.

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with the Priestess of the Moon

I followed her through the noisy plaza in front of the guild. We ended up in the cemetery.

She really likes graveyards, huh... I was getting déjà vu from when we'd first met. Her black dress and hair shone in the moonlight, looking almost ethereal.

I couldn't think of how to start a conversation, so I stayed in the shadow of a tree and watched.

"Twiiii," she called out.

"Nrow, nrow."

Furiae scratched at the cat's chin, making it purr.

Guess that name is set in stone...

She hadn't seemed happy at the party, but now she was just playing with the cat...? Had I imagined her dejected mood?

I watched for a while and then Furiae suddenly looked my way.

"Do you need something, my knight?"

Ah, busted. Then again, I hadn't been using *Stealth*, so it was no surprise.

"You snuck away," I admitted, scratching the back of my head and stepping out from behind the tree. "I was wondering what was up..."

She paused for a moment. "You've had a difficult day," she murmured eventually. "And...you used your life force to defeat the ancient dragon, correct?"

"I didn't have any other option."

Twii made its way over to me and rubbed its face on my pant leg.

Cute.

“That beast seems fond of you.”

“Yeah, it’s a friendly ca—wait, beast?!” I looked down at the cat in shock. It just cocked its head back at me.

Cute. This is a beast? Nah, that’s got to be a joke.

“You didn’t realize?” Furiae asked. “Since you can *Charm* it, the creature probably has water-aligned mana. I suppose you did it unintentionally...?”

“Seriously...you’re a magic cat?” I rubbed its head. The soft fur felt nice against my hand. It rubbed its head affectionately back into me.

Would it be able to use *Water Magic (Mid Rank)* in the future? If so, I think I’d probably cry...

“It’s not dangerous, right?” I asked Furiae.

“Young monsters are weak, and your *Charm* makes it safe.”

Well, that’s all good then. But enough small talk—time to see what’s up.

“You seem down,” I commented.

“Not really...” she replied, though her expression clouded.

So she didn’t want to talk about it? I didn’t want to force her...

“My knight,” she continued, looking seriously at me. “I heard that the Snake Sect was behind the stampede.”

“Yeah. I think the guild said something about that.” I guess the cambion Nina caught *did* have something to do with them. However, it was still just a rumor at this point. I figured that the truth would come out during the investigation.

“Did you know that members of the Snake Sect are all cambions?” she asked darkly.

“More or less, yeah.” *What’s this about?*

“I...also have demon blood...” she admitted, her voice barely a whisper. She averted her eyes. “I’m a cambion as well.”

“Huh.” I’d heard that Laphroaig was home to a lot of cambions. Since Furiae came from there, it wasn’t that much of a surprise.

“Are you shocked? That the Priestess of the Moon is actually a cambion...?”

“Eh, not reall—”

“Liar!” she spat.

Why didn’t she believe me?

“The Snake Sect wanted me in their upper echelons,” she explained. “Of course, I turned them down...but this attack might have been targeting me...” Her voice just grew sadder and sadder.

So...that was her impression.

The stampede hadn’t really been linked to her, though. If I had to venture a guess about the ancient dragon’s goal...it was to destroy Roses.

“Nothing good comes of associating with a cursed demon-blooded priestess. My knight, it hasn’t been long, but it *was* fun. I’m sure you only continued the contract because Ryousuke asked you, but your duties as a guardian are now —”

“Wait, Fuuri!” came a yell from across the quiet graveyard. I turned around to see Lucy and Sasa bounding up to us. *When’d those two show up?*

“Lu was worried that Takatsuki was going for a rendezvous with Fuu, so we followed you both,” Sasa explained with a rueful grin.

“Aya! You didn’t need to say that!”

So that was what they’d been worried about... *This ain’t a rendezvous!*

“Besides, Takatsuki wouldn’t do that... He already has three partners...”

The last half of that sentence sounded kinda terrifying. *U-Uh, Sasa? I think you might have Menace active. Sense Danger* was even blaring in my head. Plus, the dark look in her eyes didn’t inspire confidence.

My hackles were raised by her tone, but Twi was just grooming itself. Seriously, did it have no sense of danger? Sasa’s *Menace* skill could send dragons fleeing... Maybe Twi was pretty impressive...

“What are you here for, mage?” Furiae asked, her tone hard.

“Are you going to leave our party?” Lucy asked bluntly, as ever.

"I am. A nuisance like myself will do you no good."

"That's...not true! Right, Takatsuki?" Sasa looked to me for help.

"We don't think you're a nuisance. Besides, traveling alone is dangerous for a girl."

"I will be fine," stated Furiae. "I can resurrect several undead knights from this graveyard to protect me."

So she *was* thinking it through... But I could hardly just tell her to go for it.

Just then, I recalled a conversation I'd had with Sakurai.

Yeah...it's about that, isn't it?



We hadn't left Highland yet.

"Furiae doesn't call any of you by your names, does she?" Sakurai asked me.

"Now that you mention it, she doesn't. I wonder why." She always called me "my knight." Lucy was "mage" and Sasa was "warrior." That was how she usually addressed us, and Sakurai was the only one she'd call by name.

Honestly, it'd never really bothered me.

"Everyone that she ever grew close to...died."

"I...I see."

"Her parents, friends, followers of the moon goddess, and so on. They're all dead," said Sakurai. "That's why she doesn't call people she meets now by their names. It's because, if she gets attached, she'll be heartbroken when they die..."

So that's the reason.

"That's...pretty heavy."

"She said she calls me by name because I'm the Hero of Light and probably won't die."

"O-Oh..." I'd been sure that she was the kind of girl that only called the guy she liked by name. Turned out, her reasoning was way more serious than that.

“Why’d you bring it up?” I asked.

“I...thought you might manage to open her heart.”

“Huh? Really?” I wasn’t as good with girls as Sakurai though.

“People who are a little weird...have always been fond of you,” he reasoned.

“I don’t really think so...”

“Our English teacher during junior high liked you a lot. She was a demon to the rest of us, but she treated you nicely,” he said with a teasing grin.

“Forget about that already...” I wanted to pretend like that’d never happened.

One time, I’d bumped into our English teacher in the arcade—she’d been there to relieve some stress. Her surname was Takahashi; she was twenty-nine years old and single. I’d ended up challenging her to a versus match, and after that, she’d developed a fondness for me. We’d exchanged contact details and she’d started sending me long messages and calling every night...

It’d been terrifying.

She’d managed to snag a fiancé around the time I’d graduated. And...she’d apologized for not being able to wait until I turned twenty.

Seriously?! She felt the need to dump me?!

“Well, regardless of my past, I’ll do my best,” I told Sakurai.

“I’m sure you’ll manage it,” he replied.



Looks like I didn’t manage it, Sakurai, I thought.

She wanted to leave all alone. I thought we should try a bit of a candid discussion first.

“You’re worried about your demon blood?” Lucy asked her. Her sharp elf ears must’ve caught the conversation we’d been having.

“I am,” said Furiae. “No one would want to associate with a cambion...”

“Just so you know, my dad’s a demon!” exclaimed Lucy. “So, I’m a half demon! What about you?!”

“Wha?”

Well, that was a rare sight. The moon priestess was usually a cool beauty, but now, her mouth hung agape.

That did remind me—none of us had discussed our pasts with Furiae.

“Aren’t you an elf though—oh! You’ve got red hair. But...a *half* demon?”

“Yup! But Makoto doesn’t care! You look like a pure human, so you must have much less demon blood than me, right?” Lucy asked this with a smug look.

Furiae stared at me, looking lost. “U-Um! You and the warrior...really don’t care?”

Sasa and I exchanged glances.

“Uh...well, actually...” Suddenly, Sasa dropped her disguise magic. Before us, she now appeared in her true form. It’d been a while since I’d seen the lamia version of her.

“Ah!” Furiae yelped. “A-A monster?!”

“Screaming like that’s a bit hurtful,” Sasa replied.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Eh, I don’t mind.” She laughed before turning back into a human.

“Are you not an otherworlder...?”

“Yup, I’m from the same world as Takatsuki! I, uh, reincarnated...? I think that’s the word. I woke up as a lamia in Labyrinthos.”

“Th-That can happen?”

Furiae’s eyes whipped back and forth between the two girls, then she looked at me.

“So, my knight. What about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you actually reincarnate into a demon or monster?”

“Nope. Just your garden-variety otherworlder.”

"I-I see," she said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Though...I *am* the sole acolyte of a wicked deity."

"What?!" That was the loudest yell I'd heard from her yet. "B-But...you're the Hero of Roses! Don't mock me! I won't fall for it!"

Fall for it or not, it's the truth.

Suddenly, a cool voice spoke up. "It's true. Worryingly enough, our Hero Makoto is the disciple of an old god."

"Sophia?"

It was indeed her, and she was wearing a priest's robe. *What's the princess doing here?*

"Princess Sophia! You are the Priestess of Water! Surely Eir would not permit a wicked deity's follower to become a hero!"

"Well, she gave explicit permission, in fact," said Sophia with a slight sense of resignation.

"Impossible...how in the world...?"

I chose to ignore Furiae's disbelief for the moment.

"What're you doing here, Sophia?" I asked. I mean, this *was* a cemetery.

"Eir told me that you were here."

That Eir...was pretty free with information.

"R-Regardless! I am said to be the reincarnation of the Witch of Calamity from a thousand years ago!" sputtered Furiae. "People shun me wherever I go! If you're with me, they'll do the same to you! And it's not like I can become part of another country!"

She was just putting herself down more and more.

"Hey, Princess." I grabbed her hand, taking a step forward. Lucy, Sasa, and Princess Sophia went silent, but their looks grew severe.

Why? It's not like I'm doing anything I shouldn't.

"I'll tell you my goal as a wicked goddess's disciple."

“Where’d this come from?” murmured Furiae.

“I’ll save Noah from the Seafloor Temple...and take heaven back from the Sacred Deities,” I stated.

“Hero Makoto?!” exclaimed Sophia.

“What? Your goal isn’t to defeat the demon lord?”

“Oh, I’ll do that too while I’m at it.” However, my main goal was saving Noah and reviving the Titanea.

Furiae wasn’t the only one shocked by my answer—Princess Sophia was aghast as well. I suppose I *hadn’t* mentioned it before.

Lucy and Sasa were also hearing it for the first time, but neither of them seemed particularly bothered.

“E-Eir! Did you know Hero Makoto’s goal?” Sophia stammered, consulting with her goddess. “What...you did? I-I see... ‘It’s not a problem...’ A-Are you sure?”

Phew, at least Eir was helping out with the princess. I’d need to explain properly afterward.

Furiae had frozen again.

“Hey, Princess?”

She turned a disbelieving look at me. “My knight is a fool of the highest order.”

Yeah, I guess my goal is a bit much. There was only one thing I could say to her. “Whether you’re here or not, I’m an enemy of the world because I follow a wicked deity.” I grinned at her. “So...overturn the world with me!”

I got it!

Perfect communication.

I thought it was a nice line, but Lucy, Sasa, and Princess Sophia all had slightly doubtful looks.

Uh...this ain’t the best reaction...?

I thought it was cool, Makoto.

Same, Noah.

Furiae's expression—the focus of my declaration—was indescribable. I had no idea what she was thinking...but then she said one thing.

"I'll postpone annulling the contract," she murmured.

I stopped her! Whoo! I did it, Sakurai!

Though, the other three wore sour looks...

We came back to the guild hall in short order. Princess Sophia was with her guards, so there were a lot of people there now. The interior was—as ever—full of drunkards.

I was looking around for a place to sit when someone came up to me.

"Hey, Makoooo, I wanna talk."

"Emily? What's up?"

"You're pretty drunk," Lucy commented as she pulled us over to her group.

I couldn't find Jean at first, but then I spied him on the floor. Apparently, Emily'd drunk him under the table.

"You kissed Lucy while we were battling the monsters," Emily said. "Everyone was fighting for their lives, so what were you two playing at?!"

"Y-You saw?!" Lucy yelped.

"Well...that was so I could use elemental magic..."

The two of us made our excuses.

"I heard about that, Makoto!" Mary said, joining in. "Hero or not, you shouldn't be playing with girls in the middle of a battle!" She leaned in close. "But anyway, me tooo!"

Hey, don't just kiss me out of nowhere! Don't push me down either! I'm still dizzy from the lifespan loss.

Around me, I could hear all the adventurers catcalling and hooting.

Yup, this was Macallan's guild, all right.

"You appear to have my fiancé pinned down there," Princess Sophia stated in an arctic voice. Her eyes matched her tone.

Yup...she was here with us...

I looked up at her from underneath Mary. "Prin...cess...So...phi...a...?"

Mary's face paled instantly.

"Did you hear that?!" someone yelled.

"Fiancé?!"

"What?!"

"No way!"

"Impossible!"

The princess sure was popular.

"Hero Makoto. I can understand a hero's wants, but please keep it in moderation." Sophia looked at me like one might peer at a pig. Then, she walked away. The geezer guardian knight—and her other guards—followed.

The princess whispered something into the oldtimer's ear, and then he turned to face the guild hall. "Tonight's feast will celebrate the town's salvation!" he proclaimed. "Party to your heart's content! The bill will be settled by the Roses royal family!"

All adventurers answered with a resounding cheer.

Then, Princess Sophia spoke curtly. "However, Hero Makoto is *my* fiancé. If you wish to approach him in the future, you will do so through me."

In...the...future?

"Makotoooo! I'm gonna get fired!" whined Mary.

"Princess Sophia won't do that."

"Wh-What? She won't?"

"Probably not."

“The ‘probably’ is the issue! I’m having another drink.”

“That’s the same as usual, isn’t it?”

Of course, Mary wasn’t fired. The princess and her knights had special seating prepared within the guild and I spent some time speaking with her and the geezer.

Afterward, I ended up getting dragged around all the other groups.

Damn, it’s been a while since I drank this much... I swayed and then sat on the floor, holding some water. Jean was passed out next to me.

Lucy, Sasa, Furiae, Emily, and Mary were all having a girls’ night. The noise in the guild wasn’t quieting down at all. I was sure they were going to party well into the morning. Everyone was discussing the monsters and the excitement of the day.

I got curious about exactly what they were talking about and used my *Listen* skill. The conversation I heard was...slightly odd.

“Man, Macallan’s hero sure is something.”

“For sure. When I saw him wipe out those monsters, I wanted him to hold me!”

“Man, I wish I’d partied with Lucy back when she was a bronze rank.”

“Knock it off! Princess Sophia’ll be glaring at you.”

“Right...he’s going to be the brother-in-law of the next king.”

“Plus, he’s got Lucy and Aya as well!”

“Tch! That harem bastard.”

I was overhearing the men that’d screeched at the announcement of Sophia’s betrothal earlier. The princess sure was popular... She had a lot of fans.

“Right! Let’s give Makoto an alias! What about...the Triple-Timing Hero?”

“Ah, I think Mary and Fuuri are going to get taken in too.”

“Seriously...he’s got his pick of five beauties?”

“Manwhore.”

“The Manwhore Hero! Here comes Makoto the Manwhore Hero!”

“Great! Let’s make sure everyone knows the name!”

“Yeah!” the rest chorused.

Hey, it’s not like that! For crying out loud, I’m still a virgin!

I couldn’t overlook this, so I got up and started over to them. “You lot! Knock it off!”

“H-Hold on, Makoto!”

“Takatsuki, calm down!”

Sasa and Lucy immediately grabbed hold of me.

L-Lemme go! I’m gonna go blast them with waterballs, even if it won’t do any damage!

I did my best to proceed, but Sasa had my arms pinned and I couldn’t move.

“I think this is the first time I have seen my knight lose his cool like this.”

“Yeah, he’s drunk. Makoto’s a lightweight,” Lucy explained.

I thought I heard a comment along the lines of, “So...I won’t be able to spend time alone with Hero Makoto tonight...?”

And so, the party continued well into the morning...apparently. I passed out long before then.

Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Heads for Cameron

I'd been training my magic and stroking Twi, when out of the blue, Fujiyan came up and asked me a question.

"My esteemed Tackie, would you like to travel to Cameron?"

"Cameron?" I repeated. I hadn't ever been there, but I was fairly sure it was north of Roses, even more so than Highland.

"Lady Chris has safely taken on the post of the lady of the land, and I, myself, have gained a peerage. Therefore, I wish to give my thanks to the head of the Franz Trading Company for the support we received," Fujiyan explained. "How would you feel about joining us? The capital is a true melting pot of culture, and the country as a whole is very much alive with trade."

"Huh..." I pondered for a moment. "Sounds fun."

A city of trade? Highland's capital conducted a lot of business, but the class divisions there were suffocating. Cameron seemed much freer without all those restrictions.

However, Princess Sophia had said that I should go to Springrogue or Great Keith next, so I decided to check with her before making a decision.

"I do not mind," she answered.

I'd visited Princess Sophia in the church, in a space she was using as an office. After speaking, she let out a soft sigh and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Is she tired? I wondered.

"I'll take Fujiyan's airship," I told her. "We'll be away from Macallan for a week or so."

"I suppose I should also take advantage of the opportunity," she said. "It would be a good chance to offer my own greetings to the most influential people in Cameron. I will arrange documents stating such, so please, take them

with you.”

“Understood, Princess Sophia,” I affirmed.

However, she didn’t respond further. She rose from her chair, putting a halt to any work she’d been doing, and approached me. Her face was emotionless, as usual.

“Princess...Sophia?”

“Pardon?” she asked. She’d gotten closer and was now standing right next to me. From her slightly shorter height, she gazed up into my eyes meaningfully.

“Sophia.”

When I called her by her given name, she smiled happily and brought her face closer to mine. “I would honestly prefer to accompany you...” she murmured. “However, I cannot leave Roses for the moment.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I am able.”

Just standing with her in the middle of the room felt kind of awkward, so I flicked my eyes over to a wine-red-colored sofa, indicating that we should sit. The two of us sank down into the cushions, and Princess Sophia let her head fall softly onto my shoulder.

“To think that you are leaving me so alone... What a coldhearted man you are.”

“I didn’t—”

She interrupted my protest. “It was a joke.” She smiled up at me and I put an arm gently around her.

“I’ll be back as soon as I am able,” I repeated.

“In which case,” she whispered, her voice caressing my ear, “I will take as much as I can before you leave...” She was flushed red up to her own ears as she put her arm around my waist. Gently, she closed her dark eyes.

My body felt hot. I wasn’t so unfeeling that I’d do nothing...not when she was like this.

Go for it! Have your way with her! cried Noah.

Remember to use protection, Mako! added Eir.

I could've done without the commentary from the peeping goddesses. *Pipe down in the peanut gallery!* I thought sharply at them.

When I didn't immediately make a move, Princess Sophia cracked her eyelids open to look at me questioningly. "Makoto...?"

Enough distraction. At once, I shook off the goddesses' commentary and kissed the princess.

Afterward, she turned her lidded eyes my way once more.

"Makoto...I love you."

"That's...an honor," I managed.

The cold indifference she'd shown me when we'd first met had melted away like ice.

"Mmh...Makoto," she murmured, moving in for another kiss.

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and answered with a kiss of my own. We spent a while making out like that. The door was locked, so it wasn't like we would be interrupted.

They're not doing anything! Just kissing... I heard Noah complain.

That disciple of yours is such a late bloomer.

Your precious Sophie isn't assertive enough.

True, noted Eir. *Lucy and Aya are strong rivals. She'll have to try harder...*

You shouldn't forget Furiae either.

The peanut gallery was still going at it... Would I get any break at all once Sophia and I were married?

I let out a mental sigh.



That night, we all met up at the guild, and I took the opportunity to tell Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae about the plans for tomorrow.

“So, we’re heading for Cameron,” I explained.

“Well, I don’t mind *that*...” Lucy replied.

“But where were you today?” Sasa asked.

“Wh-What’s with you both?” I sputtered, unnerved by the chill in their voices.

“This food is delicious, my knight,” Furiae said. She was, as ever, off in her own world. The table was indeed laden with food, including tomato pasta and ham pizza.

“Your neck looks red, Makoto. Insect bites?”

“I can smell a woman on you, Takatsuki...”

Both Lucy and Sasa had cornered me. *Uh, what? Why does it feel like I’m up on the stand?*

But then, Furiae spoke up. “The mage and warrior searched for you earlier. Unfortunately, it would appear that you were in the midst of a rendezvous with another woman.” She grinned through cheeks full of pizza.

I felt a chill run down my spine. “Princess? D-Don’t say things like that.”

Lucy and Sasa looked sharply at me.

“Who were you with?” asked Lucy. “Mary? Or some other adventurer, maybe?”

“There were some girls going on and on about how they were talking with you at the guild earlier,” Sasa said accusingly.

Lucy’s red eyes and Sasa’s darker pair were trained on me with such intensity... I couldn’t do anything but surrender.

“I-I was with Princess Sophia...” I admitted.

Both of their mouths dropped open.

“You got with a princess?!”

“A rendezvous with your boss...”

Wait, that wasn’t... “You two, hold on a minute!” I’d actually gone to see Sophia so I could get permission for the trip to Cameron. And then, well...a bit

more than that happened.

“I guess they *are* going to be married,” Lucy mused.

Sasa sighed. “Oh well.”

After that, both of them seemed to calm down.

I-I'm off the hook?

The meal picked back up after that, and as we finished eating, I filled the three girls in on some details. “It’ll take about a week for the round trip, so get your stuff together.”

“Got it,” Lucy replied.

“Fuu, let’s go buy some stuff for the trip,” Sasa added.

“Sure. Though what exactly would ‘stuff’ be?”

“You’ll stand out looking like that, so maybe some plainer clothes?” Lucy suggested.

“I-I will?” asked Furiae. “I don’t really know what you mean, but I suppose you can both take the lead.”

It seemed that the three of them were going to do some shopping. Honestly, I didn’t have anything to get ready; I’d just buy whatever I needed once we got there.

“Makoto, we’re going now!” Lucy exclaimed.

“There’re places still open?”

“Nina said Fujiwara’s is always open.”

“Seriously?”

Apparently, the Fujiwara Firm was—at least for us—a 24/7 shop. Now that I thought about it, Nina was Fujiyan’s wife, so she was a noble now... Well, whatever. He was always telling me not to hold myself back.

Furiae asked if I was coming, but I told them I had stuff to do and just waved as they left.

Earlier, I’d walked up to the reception desk to tell Mary that I’d be leaving

town. I *was* a hero now, so I needed to notify the guild whenever I was traveling afar.

“What, you’re already going away again?!” had been Mary’s—expected—complaint. “Well, you just *have* to wait until I get off work.”

That’d been a few hours ago, so now, true to my word, I was waiting here for her.

While I was spacing out around the guild stalls, she came up to me wearing her casual clothes.

“You just barely got back...and now you’re heading off again,” she complained, looking sulkily at me. She grabbed my arm tightly. “Well, now you’re stuck with me until closing!”

I was unable to say no to her face, so I decided to just go along with it. “R-Right... We’re leaving tomorrow afternoon, so tonight should be fine.”

We ended up at the same bar she’d taken me to before I’d left for Labyrinthos. Mary spent a while complaining about her job at the guild. Apparently, the increase in monster activity had been hard on her too...

Eventually, the barkeep announced, “We’re closing soon.”

We left as the bar shut down for the night; however, Mary complained that she hadn’t gotten enough to drink yet. “Let’s carry on here,” she said, pointing at a brick apartment building.

This place was familiar to me as well. “You live here, right?” I asked.

“Yup. Let’s go.”

She pulled me along...and we ended up having an after-party.

“Here you go,” she said. “Wine-soaked fruit. Also, we’ve got some nuts and cheese for snacks.”

“Thank you,” I replied. She handed me a fancy glass filled with sangria, and I toasted with her before taking a sip. The drink was nice and sweet, but the wine made it pretty strong... I’d need to take little sips so I didn’t get wasted.

“Hey, Makoto?” asked Mary. She sat down next to me and leaned into my side.

“Y-Yes?”

Wait... This might be...the first time I've ever been alone with a woman in her personal room...

When I'd been *with* Princess Sophia, it had been in a workspace, not a private room. As for Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae, well...they were normally all together in the end. Besides, when that happened, we were usually in *my* room, not any of theirs. Honestly, I hadn't gotten many chances to go into a woman's room.

My heart suddenly started to race at the realization.

“So...why do you keep vanishing?” asked Mary.

I gave a rueful smile. “How many times have we had this conversation?” I'd already explained the reasons behind my excursions—all of them had been either for my work as a hero or by decree of a goddess (well, more or less).

“No,” she countered, “I'm not having it.”

“Then I don't know what to tell you.”

“You're going to marry the princess and move to the capital, right? You'll never come back to the sticks, back to a place like *this*. At the very least, you could spend some time here before you're gone for good.”

“I'm not going to move,” I assured her. “I like Macallan too much.”

“Men always just say what we want to hear!”

“Is...that what your ex did?”

“You're not going to get anywhere if you ask about a woman's past like that...” she murmured, leaning even more heavily on me. Her breathing was already slowing down.

She'll probably be asleep before long.

“I won't pass out,” she said suddenly. “I'm not letting you sleep tonight.”

“Did...you just read my mind?” I asked, startled by her second wind. *What was coming next?*

“Listen up! I had my eyes on you first...and now you’re one of two heroes that our country has.”

“You and Lucas were the only people who were nice to me...back when I got *that* nickname,” I said, reminiscing. It felt like so long ago now.

I was looking off into the distance, still thinking back, when Mary called out to me. I turned to see what she wanted.

“Mmh.”

What?!

Hot breath and the scent of alcohol filled my mouth.

She’d...kissed me.

“You let your guard down, Mr. Hero,” she giggled.

“W-Well, that was sudden,” I said, placing a hand over my mouth.



I drained my glass to distract her from how much her kiss had gotten to me...and choked slightly on the drink. Mary giggled more and I couldn't look her in the eye—I just stared aimlessly around the room.

“Uh...” I muttered.

She refilled my now empty glass. “You don't need to panic,” she remarked with an alluring sigh. She twined her hand through the crook of my arm.

Her actions seemed really at ease. Not at all like Lucy and Sasa...

“No thinking of other girls,” she scolded.

“Seriously, how're you doing that?!” *Does she have Mind Reading as well?*

“You're just too obvious.”

I was...obvious? Well, I didn't have much experience in hiding my emotions, so it was no surprise that an older woman could see through me.

“You're so cute right now,” she trilled. “Just like when you first came to the guild.”

“Guh! I've grown! I've got experience now!”

“Then can you keep me company until morning?”

“Obviously!” I exclaimed, taking her challenge.

And so, I decided to spend the night with her.

When I stirred awake, it was to the sight of an unfamiliar room.

Uh...I drank at Mary's place last night...and then...

I didn't remember anything after that.

Mary was in the bed. *Should I wake her up?*

The thought had barely crossed my mind when her eyes snapped open.

“Morning, Makoto. You were so manly last night. ≡”

“What?!”

H-Had I finally climbed the stairs to adult—

Noah cut me off. *Nope, you didn't.*

You fell asleep at the first step, Eir added.

W-Well...that felt like a waste. I turned back to Mary. "You shouldn't lie," I told her after a moment.

"Oh, you remember it. Should have gone for it." She stretched widely. The thin nightwear showed off the lines of her body perfectly... *Hot.*

Suddenly, she shucked her clothes off like it was nothing.

"What are you doing?!" I exclaimed.

"Eh? I'm having a shower and then going to work...?"

"Say something before you start stripping!" I begged, swiftly turning around.

"I don't mind if you look," she remarked. "Oh, and we're leaving together! No heading off ahead by yourself." At that, she vanished into the bathroom. It wasn't long before I heard running water and humming.

I just couldn't calm down.

Guess I should wash up as well... I used my water magic to clean myself and my clothes.

After her shower, Mary came in again wearing nothing but a towel. I glanced away.

"Which set of underwear should I wear today? Makoto, you choose."

"Whichever one!"

"Nope, I'm not putting anything on until you pick."

"The black ones, then!"

"Oh, you like these?" She grinned, sliding them provocatively onto her body.

Did we really not do anything last night?! She was getting really, *blatantly* close.

Even as we sat down and ate the sandwiches she'd made, Mary was right at my side. And unlike last night, she was in a much better mood. We spent time at her place until the guild was due to open, and then we finally left.

“I’m going to the guild, what about you?” she asked.

“I’m heading out of Macallan—it’s time to board Fujiyan’s airship.”

“We’re going opposite directions then. Aww...” She pouted. “You’re already leaving.”

“I’ll only be gone for a week.”

“But then you’ll be going somewhere else, won’t you?”

“Uh, well...” I didn’t have a good response to that.

“Whatever. You said you’ll be in Macallan in the future, so I’ll choose to believe you.”

Did I really make that promise? I suppose I don’t have any real inclination to live elsewhere.

“I’ll be back. Definitely.”

“Great! Good luck!” she cheered.

Suddenly, she grabbed my head and pressed her lips to mine, kissing me deeply.

About a dozen seconds passed before she broke away.

“Ack! I’m late! Bye!” She immediately rushed off, and I waved at her as she left.

I’d...spent the night together with the “sister” that’d treated me like a little brother before now. There was an indescribable sense of satisfaction filling my heart.

Guess I’ve grown up!

But then, an alarm started blaring in my mind. A beat later, my head started to throb. *S-Sense Danger? Now? What on earth?!*

You already know, don’t you? Noah asked.

Mako... remarked Eir. *You make me so sad...*

Those two made it sound like I was on trial...

However, I soon understood. Simultaneously, three voices called out my

name...from the depths of hell. It was Lucy, Sasa, and Princess Sophia...each one was staring darkly at me.

Why were they here?!

You didn't go home last night, so obviously they came looking for you, Noah drawled.

And I gave Sophie a revelation of where you were!

Wait, Eir'd snitched on me?!

I spent the time we had left before our departure getting chewed out by the princess. And on the airship, Lucy and Sasa took turns scolding me.

Furiae just ignored me and played with Twi.

Our flight soon landed in the capital of Cameron, Bassoon.

Cameron was located on the northern coast of the continent and was a thriving center of commerce. Geographically, it was the closest country to the northern continent—the nesting grounds of the demons—so it was surrounded by three layers of walls. Cameron also had the highest concentration of financial institutions on the continent.

On top of that, Cameron was a crossroads for trade. The vast amount of weaponry and armor made in the neighboring country of Caol Ilan passed through Cameron, and not just to the other countries on this continent—wares were also sent along trade routes to the eastern and southern continents.

All of this led to Cameron being a thriving mix of races and people.

“So, what are your thoughts on Cameron?” Fujiyan asked grandly, pointing at the crowded market town.

Sasa seemed in awe. “There are tons of stores here!”

“Aya, Fuuri, let's go shopping!” Lucy exclaimed.

“So many large buildings,” Furiae murmured. “Incredible...”

It seemed like the three of them were going out to explore.

“I shall be venturing to speak with the head of the Franz Trading Company,”

Fujiyan said. “My esteemed Tackie, will you be joining me? The Franz Trading Company building is both the owner’s home and his store. It’s considered by some to be the best shop on the continent.”

So Fujiyan, Nina, and Chris would be going there. Chris would also need to report that she was now in charge of Macallan.

“Takatsuki, let’s go find somewhere to eat!” Sasa urged, tugging on my arm. “I bought a map already.”

Both the girls’ plans and Fujiyan’s sounded like good options, but...

“Sorry, I need to go to the Temple of Time.”

Though I really did want to go with them, I had to turn everyone down. There was a task I needed to complete—Princess Sophia had told me to give her greetings to Estelle, priestess for the Goddess of Fate. It was an important job from the princess, so I figured that I should probably get it done first.

“Should we come with you?” Lucy suggested.

“You don’t need to worry about it,” I said. “I’ve been told it’ll take a long time to get an audience with Estelle. Apparently, she’s really popular.”

“Indeed!” Fujiyan remarked. “She is a difficult person to meet as a commoner... If I may, I would also like to accompany you.”

“Right, you follow Ira, don’t you?” I asked.

Ira, otherwise known as the Goddess of Fate, was Cameron’s patron deity. She had many faithful followers, even outside the country, so her priestess would inevitably be very popular. Fujiyan was a strong believer in Ira, so he most definitely would like to meet the priestess.

“My husband...”

“Sir Michio...”

Nina and Chris both wore slightly pinched looks.

Well, priestesses were women, so I guess the newlyweds didn’t want Fujiyan to meet her... It was probably best not to invite any of them.

“I’ll go on my own,” I decided. “We’re all staying in the same place, right?”

“We are. It’s high-class lodging known by the name Sheeraton. I will provide you with a map.”

“Thanks, Fujiyan.”

With all that sorted, I headed for the Temple of Time.

“So many people...” I mumbled.

The Temple of Time was packed. A whole crowd of people was gathered, ready to offer prayers for success in work or academics. Various spots on the temple’s grounds were taken up by clergy members—they looked to be performing rituals that looked like exorcisms, along with selling talismans and the like. This place was just like some of the more famous shrines in Japan.

The figure most in demand was, of course, Estelle—the Priestess of the Goddess of Fate—and there were various conditions you had to fulfill to meet her directly. I’d brought a letter of introduction from Princess Sophia, so I could get an audience despite those stipulations. However, Estelle’s schedule was full today, so the receptionist asked me to come back tomorrow.

There was a queue of dozens of people that were lined up facing the largest set of doors in the temple, and they were all either knights clad in shining armor or nobles dressed up in finery.

They sure make bank here...

With slightly impolite thoughts running through my mind, I took the appointment slip from the receptionist.

Since I was now done here for the day, I needed to decide whether to meet up with the girls or Fujiyan...

I didn’t know where any of them were, though, so I was somewhat stuck.

“Oh! Are you not Hero Makoto of Roses?” came a musical voice.

I turned around and saw a woman with shining golden hair and deep blue eyes. “Princess Noelle?” I asked. The princess of Highland was now standing in front of me.

I was just about to offer a proper genuflection as a greeting, but she stopped me before I could. “I do not need such formalities from the hero who saved our

city,” she remarked with a wide smile, putting me at ease.

“What brought you here?” I asked.

“I needed to take some of Estelle’s time to discuss the Northern Front Plan. Though, I do feel somewhat bad for the people that have had to wait...”

Huh... I had to wait a whole day to get an appointment with Estelle, even with Princess Sophia’s introduction, but another princess of the same rank was able to immediately jump the queue...

“Well, goodbye,” I said, making my excuses as I went to slip past her and the Temple Knights that were flanking her. I’d been concerned that it was rude to stand and talk to her in the middle of the crowded temple. However, she stopped me from leaving.

“What a shame,” she lamented. “Fate has allowed us to meet, so we should spend some time talking. Which inn is accommodating you during your time in Bassoon?”

“We’re at the Sheeraton,” I answered.

“Wonderful! That is close to my lodgings. Let us head that way together.”

She was a princess from the biggest country on the continent, and on top of that, was the next in line to the throne. Refusing would probably be rude...

“Then, I look forward to the trip,” I said, agreeing to her plan.

The princess was great at moving conversation along. Even I could keep up a discussion with her, despite my shyness.

“Is Sophia not here?” she asked.

“Nah. She had too much work in Roses.”

“What a shame. Apparently, there have been more monster stampedes as of late.”

“There have,” I confirmed. “The town we live in just weathered one, actually.”

“Oh my. What happened?”

“Well, with everyone that lives there...” I began, launching into the tale as we strolled through the capital.

The princess ended up guiding me to the Sheeraton. She came to the city fairly regularly, so she was well-versed on the routes through it.

I spent most of the walk feeling awkward about a *princess* effectively being a tour guide, though I did my best to keep the conversation flowing. We were almost there when I heard someone call out my surname.

It had come from someone wearing silver armor—he had light-brown hair framing a face that would’ve looked right at home in a boy band.

“Oh, Sakurai,” I answered with a wave of my own. “Fancy running into you in Cameron.” By his side stood a particular dark-haired beauty.

Uh, wasn’t she with Lucy and Sasa?

Before I could voice the question, Princess Noelle trotted forward. “I-It’s been a while, Furiae,” she stammered, tugging on Sakurai’s arm.

“It has,” Furiae responded. “Not long enough, though.”

“What are you doing with Ryouzuke?”

“I don’t see any need to tell you.”

I could almost see the sparks flying between them. Memories of imprisonment must have still been fresh in Furiae’s mind.

“I saw a friend earlier and found out Takatsuki was in town,” Sakurai explained.

A friend? So...Fujiyan?

“I...see,” Princess Noelle answered, looking uneasily between Sakurai and Furiae’s faces.

I guessed that she felt like she’d just caught her fiancé in the middle of an affair. Deciding that I didn’t want to stick my head any further into this mess, I tried to slip past them.

“Wait, my knight,” Furiae called out, stopping me. “Ryouzuke’s here to see you. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Huh? Oh, right. Yeah.”

Damn... I was just unconsciously trying to avoid the hassle.

“Since you’re with Noelle, did you go to the temple?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Was going to see the Priestess of Fate. Didn’t get the chance, though.” I shrugged.

“I’ve never met her either. She’s apparently an amazing woman.”

“Oh... Even *you* haven’t met her?” *Just what kind of person is she?* I was looking forward to tomorrow.

“When’d you get here?” I asked him, changing the topic.

“A couple of days ago, by airship. I...” Suddenly, he trailed off and glanced to the side.

I followed suit.

“Clear off.”

“I do not answer to you.”

Furiae and Princess Noelle seemed moments away from a blowup.

“Princess, calm down,” I said to Furiae.

“I am calm.”

Really?

“You too, Noelle,” Sakurai added.

“R-Right... My apologies,” she answered.

At least he’d managed to soothe her.

“Weren’t you with Lucy and Sasa?” I asked Furiae.

“I was. We went shopping... The two of them said they’d visit dozens of stores though, and I couldn’t keep up.”

“Right... They’re a lively pair.”

Lucy was physically fit from her training as an adventurer, and Sasa had exceptional physical capabilities. Furiae would have indeed found it tough to keep up with that combination.

“They are,” she said. Then, she grabbed at my sleeve and tugged on it slightly. “Incidentally, Ryousuke wishes to speak with you. The three of us should go somewhere to do so.”

“Hmm, I mean, it’s not like I know anywhere around here...” I’d never been to Cameron before, so I had no idea what was in the area.

While I was thinking over where we could go, Princess Noelle hurriedly interrupted the conversation. “Hold a moment.” She turned to Furiae. “Why would *you* be joining them?!”

“Why would I not? He is my guardian knight, so of course I would join him.”

“Th-Then...I would do the same because Ryousuke is my fiancé!”

So Princess Noelle would be tagging along as well... Would it cause a problem with her work?

Furiae stared flatly at her. “There aren’t many shops a royal can visit, so we wouldn’t be able to have a relaxed conversation.”

“B-But!”

Noelle seemed like she was on the ropes. Still, I owed her for showing me the way here, so I decided to offer a hand.

I looked at Furiae. “Princess, don’t be mean. She can come with us, right?”

Furiae glared unhappily back at me. “Whose side are you on?”

“Thank you...” Princess Noelle murmured after a moment.

“Have you had lunch yet?” Sakurai asked, seeking to change the subject.

“No, actually. I’m pretty hungry.”

“Want to eat with me, then?” he offered. “Noelle and Furiae are welcome as well.”

Princess Noelle’s face brightened instantly, and it was matched in opposite intensity by Furiae’s sour expression.

“Princess,” I said, addressing Furiae. “That look’s a waste of your beauty.”

“Silence, traitor,” she spat, glaring. Clearly, she was still sore about me helping

Princess Noelle.

“Well, lead the way then,” I said to Sakurai.

“Sure.” He smiled, guiding us into the town.

Soon, we arrived at a relatively normal-looking diner. I’d been sure that he was gonna take us to some high-class restaurant.

“I’ve never been anywhere like this,” Princess Noelle marveled, eyes wide.

“Isn’t this rather expensive, my knight?” Furiae asked me, looking over the menu and frowning.

“Nah, this is about normal.” You couldn’t really compare the cost of food in a full restaurant (especially one in a capital city) to the prices charged by the cheap stalls around Macallan’s guild.

“You come here a lot, then?” I asked Sakurai.

“Nope. Actually, this is the first time I’ve been here. One of my friends in the Soleil Knights told me about it. They’re all regulars apparently.” He passed me a menu. “So, what’ll you have?”

I glanced over it. “Hmmm, I’ll start with an ale,” I decided.

“I’ll...have white wine, I think,” Furiae followed up.

“I guess I’ll have the same as you, Takatsuki. Noelle?”

“What? Oh, I need to choose for myself... What should I have?” She looked lost.

Yep, she was definitely royalty if she normally didn’t even need to pick from a menu...

“This would probably be an easy drink,” Sakurai said, immediately pointing at the menu.

Seeing that, Furiae turned to me. “I am hungry, my knight.”

“Then...order something?” I told her.

“You choose.”

“But I’ve never been here...” I protested. Still, a quick look at the menu was all I needed—Furiae liked meat dishes, so I ordered a ham steak and some grilled meat on the bone.

“Why such heavy food?” she complained.

“I thought you liked this stuff?” I asked, confused. She was always enjoying skewers and thick joints of ham from the stalls in Macallan.

“I do,” she said with an unhappy look, “but I wanted something more refined while we’re here.”

Man, this stuff’s difficult. I wanted to pull a Sakurai and be all smooth with it...

When our drinks arrived, all four of us toasted.

Princess Noelle seemed to be enjoying the food, even if I wasn’t sure about ordering such casual fare for royalty. Though, she didn’t quite seem to understand how to go about eating it and was struggling a bit.

Furiae, on the other hand, was used to eating this type of food with the adventurers in Macallan. In fact, her cheeks were fully stuffed with meat.

You could eat a bit more neatly, y’know...

“You’ve gotten really bold now,” Sakurai said to her, shooting a sidelong grin at me.



“It’s because my knight always treats me so roughly, despite me being no adventurer.”

“You’re the one that decided to tag along to deal with goblins,” I countered.

“Goblins...?” Sakurai asked. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“My *Charm* skill meant that there was no danger,” Furiae declared proudly. It was kind of cute how she puffed up.

“Yeah, she even got the goblin king with it,” I added. I’d been panicking then, but it’d worked out...and the other two certainly seemed interested in the story.

A bit later, Princess Noelle said, “You seem to be enjoying Roses, Furiae.”

“You have no right to say that,” was Furiae’s only response.

“Please...don’t be so hostile.”

Furiae stared for a moment longer before seeming to decide that her animosity had been too sharp. “Sorry,” she apologized, averting her eyes.

The two of them really don’t get along...

“Oh, Commander!” a young man suddenly called out from behind Sakurai. “You decided to check the place out after all! And with another new woman? Vice Commander Saki’ll be jealous.” He was wearing the same armor as the Soleil Knights, so he was probably one of Sakurai’s men.

“Some guys have all the luck,” he continued. “What kind of beauty are you with—” He trailed off and froze when he saw Princess Noelle at our table.

“Come on,” chided the knight’s friend as he walked up. “This new girl can’t be that—” Again, stunned silence as he reacted the same way to Princess Noelle’s presence.

Both of the knights’ faces had gone ashen. “L-Lady Noelle?!” the two exclaimed in unison. Apparently, they’d been focused on Furiae and hadn’t noticed that their princess was also there...

“Pay me no mind,” said Princess Noelle with a blank face.

“Excuse us!” they cried—again in unison—before immediately retreating.

“See?” Furiae said. “Royals make commoners get all concerned.”

“I don’t think that’s the problem here,” I replied, unable to resist a short laugh.

“Incidentally, Ryousuke,” said Princess Noelle with a fixed smile. “What did they mean by ‘*another* new woman’?”

“N-Noelle?” he managed, his own smile stiffening.

“You have so many fiancées...and it is *still* not enough? This will not do.”

I could practically hear the menace in her words... She was maaad.

“That, my knight, is a domineering woman,” Furiae muttered to me.

“Domineering?” Princess Noelle’s head snapped to look at us. “I am not domineering! This is normal!”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Furiae commented. “My knight has both the mage and warrior as lovers, and the two remained calm when he made a move on Princess Sophia. *That* is a non-domineering woman.”

“Wait a minute...” I started. *That...doesn’t seem exactly accurate. I distinctly remember enduring a lot of lecturing from Lucy and Sasa.*

“He...was *with* Sophia?!” Noelle exclaimed.

“There aren’t issues with her being a priestess?” Sakurai wondered.

“Well, Eir gave permission, so...”

Hang on, I thought, I’m in the line of fire now!

As I tried to sidestep that conflict, my *Listen* skill picked up something interesting.

“That ghost ship is a problem,” said a nearby voice.

“Sure is. Business is damned.”

“We pay all the ridiculous taxes, so I wish they’d use them! Send the army in.”

Ghost ships are a thing in this world?!

“Hey, Sakurai,” I said, bringing up the topic, “you hear anything about a ghost ship in Cameron?”

“I have—the knights mentioned it. It’s been showing up along trade routes, and it’s causing issues with shipping.”

“A ghost ship?” asked Furiae. “They need only exorcise it, right, my knight?”

“Exorcisms are part of moon magic, though, so there probably aren’t many that can,” I pointed out.

Whew, looks like I dodged the bullet from our previous conversation.

“Sir Makoto!” Princess Noelle demanded. “What is your relationship with Sophia?!”

Or not.

There was a blatant look of curiosity on her face and I ended up stuck and needing to explain myself...

The next day, I arrived at the Temple of Time once more, ready to meet Estelle. I got there thirty minutes early. For some reason, my name was called immediately.

“This way, Hero of Roses Sir Makoto Takatsuki. Lady Estelle is waiting.”

Slightly nervous, I opened the door.

I’m just here to give greetings on behalf of Princess Sophia, so I shouldn’t need to do anything difficult... “Shouldn’t,” of course, was the operative word in that statement.

There were no guards inside the room, just a single woman. She was wearing a fancy dress.

Security-wise, isn’t that a bit...risky?

“I’m Makoto Takatsuki,” I said, introducing myself.

“I know. Sit down.” Her order was blunt, and it was hard to detect any amiability in her voice.

I did as she instructed and sat down in front of her.

“Um... Thank you very much for grant—”

“Get to the point,” she interrupted.

She sure is impatient. Well, she was a busy woman. I should get the greetings over with.

“I offer my greetings as Hero of Roses on behalf of Princess Sophia. I assume Ira will be at the center of the Northern Front Plan, and we of Roses will do our utmost to carry out our part of the plan.”

My words seemed a bit ceremonial, but I did understand the point of greeting Estelle like this—Roses was a small country, and building relations was important.

The priestess didn’t respond—she just looked sharply at me.

Eventually, she spoke. “I have a dilemma.”

I looked questioningly at her. What did she mean?

“Were you aware,” she began, “that as the Priestess of Fate, I can see the future?”

“Of course,” I replied. Everyone knew that. Ira could see past and future, everything that had happened, and everything that would happen. As her priestess, Estelle had also gained some of that insight. That was why her assistance was so indispensable with the Northern Front Plan.

“Well, I cannot see the entire future,” she continued.

“You can’t?”

I wasn’t exactly knowledgeable about *Fate Magic* skills. Then again, I knew essentially nothing outside of the *Water Magic* skill tree.

“Firstly, I cannot see the futures of adherents to other gods...particularly, those zealous individuals whom the Sacred Deities cannot reach.”

“Like members of the Snake Sect?” I asked.

“Indeed. I cannot see the future of those that put their faith in the daemons. Their fate appears almost clouded in mist...”

“That...would be a problem,” I replied vaguely.

I didn’t know about that. I guess fate magic isn’t all-powerful.

“After all, fate magic is not all-powerful,” she said. It was like she’d read my mind... “The Snake Sect is our enemy. It would be too much to ask to be able to know everything. However, we can defeat them if we can act correctly.”

I let out a confused noise, not seeing where she was going with her statement.

“The Great Demon Lord will soon return,” she stated. “Time is precious, and it is fair to say that the fate of the world rests upon each action we take. However...one of our allies has a clouded future.”

The conversation had grown much tenser. I paused for a weighted moment. “There’s a traitor?”

“A traitor would be easier to understand,” she replied. “As I said, the Sacred Deities’ power cannot reach zealous believers in other gods...” her eyes turned to jab into me like daggers. “Among us is a believer of...the Wicked Deity Noah.”

Geh! In the line of fire again?!

“Hold on a minute!” I countered. “Eir gave her blessing for me to become a hero of Roses!” I was indeed a believer of Noah, and she was certainly treated as a wicked deity. I had Eir’s permission, though, so it shouldn’t be a problem.

“And Eir is the cause of my dilemma,” explained Estelle. “She permitted the disciple of a wicked deity to stand as a hero...”

She let out a hmph.

I gulped.

“Hero Makoto Takatsuki of Roses. I have a request for you.”

“A request?”

After all that? I couldn’t help but have a bad feeling.

“There has been a ghost ship haunting Cameron’s shipping routes... Were you aware of it?”

“Well...more or less.” I’d heard it brought up during lunch yesterday. At first, I’d thought it was gossip, but apparently, it was interfering with trade.

“I would like for you to investigate it.”

“Uh, why me?” Cameron’s military was far from weak. While it wasn’t on the same level as Highland’s or Great Keith’s, the country’s finances meant that they were the most well-equipped forces.

“Three investigations have already been launched. Each has failed.”

“Failed?” I repeated.

“The ship in question uses some form of illusion—those who have confronted it have retained no memory of the ship.”

“What does that have to do with—”

“Your *RPG Player* skill includes the ability to see the world from an outside perspective,” she interrupted. “It should render the illusion ineffectual.”

So she knew about my skill...

“Ira knows all the skills that people have. This enables the most suitable assignment of labor.”

I let out a sigh—she’d seemingly read my mind again. A memory came back to me, and I pulled out my Soul Book.

This was written under the description of *RPG Player*:

A skill that lets its user view from the perspective of someone playing an RPG. You can see in 360 degrees! This is a unique skill that’s exclusive to otherworlders, so you’re one lucky guy!

—Goddess of Fortune, Ira

So...that excitable description had come from Ira?

Estelle cleared her throat. “Since the illusions will not affect you, I wish for you to investigate the ship. It shall not be an uncompensated task. Roses is likely spending a significant sum on defense against the increased monster activity. Cameron will be willing to support those costs. Would that be acceptable?” She’d asked me, but I could tell it was really more of a statement and not something I could refuse.

I looked the priestess in the eye and spoke. “I will undertake that

investigation, Lady Estelle.”

“Thank you. We will provide the ship, and you will leave the day after tomorrow. Get your preparations in order.”

Apparently declaring the conversation over, the priestess left the room.

I...was neck-deep in trouble here.

Eir, she's not... I heard Noah murmur.

Nah, replied Eir, *she can't be...*

What was it?

Be careful, Makoto.

Good luck, Mako. ☆

I was slightly concerned, but neither of them would tell me what was going on.

So, that's how I got dragged into investigating a ghost ship.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Searches for the Ghost Ship

“The weather’s great,” I mused, watching the gulls swoop through the blue sky above.

We’d just left port in Cameron on a warship that’d been provided by Estelle. It was a large galleon with a reasonable complement of guns—she definitely hadn’t short-changed us on firepower. With a ship like this, we should be able to clobber a ghost ship or two.

I spent a while staring out at the sea and sky. Sunlight was sparkling off the waves, interrupted every so often by a fish breaking the surface. Things were peaceful.

Then, someone came up behind me.

“So, this is what a ship is like,” Furiae commented. “It’s always swaying... Feels rather strange.” She was holding her hair down to stop it from flying all over the place in the strong ocean breeze.

“You’re not seasick?” I asked.

“It would seem not,” she replied with a cheery smile. But then, her tone turned slightly regretful. “It was a shame the other two could not come...”

Indeed, Lucy and Sasa were sitting this one out—they weren’t on the ship with us. I thought back to our conversation from a couple of days ago.



“A ghost ship?!” exclaimed Lucy and Sasa in unison. Their faces had clouded over at my explanation.

Lucy seemed hesitant about the idea. “If it’s a ghost ship, will it actually be haunted?”

“I mean, probably?” I answered. “Can you not handle ghosts?”

“I’m...not particularly fond of them.”

Oh, so she’s not going then...

“But you’re fine with them, right, Sasa?” I asked. She’d happily powdered the various skeletons and zombies in the underground waterways back in Highland.

“Ghosts are one thing, but I get seasick...” She trailed off.

“Wait? Really?”

“Yeah...” she admitted after a moment.

So she could handle a flying airship but not one actually floating on the sea.

“What about you, Princess?” I asked Furiae

“Me? I’ve never been on a ship, but I’d like to!”

She seemed all for it. However, the strongest fighters in our party were Lucy and Sasa. I wasn’t confident about taking on a ghost ship when it was just Furiae and me, but I didn’t want to force the other girls to come along if they didn’t want to.

Hmm...I’m stuck...



Back on the ship, I heard another voice call out to me. “Takatsuki, let’s get this investigation done. Furiae, you can hide behind Takatsuki or me if things get dicey.”

“Sorry to drag you along when you’re already so busy,” I apologized.

“It’s you asking, so I’ll make time.” My handsome childhood friend grinned with gleaming teeth. The Hero of Light—Sakurai—had temporarily joined our party, and my worries about a lack of firepower had vanished in the blink of an eye. It was truly a relief to have him here.

“You two get along well,” Furiae commented.

“Yes, you do.” Princess Noelle stepped out from behind Sakurai. “Sir Makoto, I really would like to have you join the Soleil Knights.”

For some reason, *she’d* decided to tag along as well. Was that...going to cause

issues? *I guess she probably wants to spend time with Sakurai.*

“If you weren’t here, it would be even better,” Furiae snapped sourly.

“You probably aren’t used to ships. If you get seasick, you can get off at any time,” Princess Noelle shot back.

The two of them glared at each other.

“Don’t you have work to do at the church?” Furiae asked. “And yet, you’re idling away here.”

“There are no issues on my part. In fact, you have no combat skills, correct? You might get in the way.”

“Don’t be an idiot. I’m the Priestess of the Moon. A necromancer will doubtless be useful against a ghost ship. Ghosts are more likely to appear at night, so your *Sun Magic* skills will be of little use.”

“I can still use healing and support magic at night!” exclaimed Princess Noelle. “I’ll be more useful than you.”

“Oh, you went there.”

“It is simply the truth.”

“Then, perhaps a wager as to who’ll be more useful?” suggested Furiae.

“Very well.”

Come on, Furiae! She’s the princess of a massive country—what are you thinking? And Princess Noelle, I could do without you picking fights either...

“Noelle, let’s head over there,” Sakurai urged with a reluctant smile, tugging his fiancée away.

“Come on, Furiae,” I said, pulling at her arm and heading in the opposite direction.

The two priestesses hissed at each other like cats.

They really don’t get along... I wish they would, though...

The rest of the day was peaceful, and our voyage passed without even a

single monster appearing.

Over dinner, the captain gave us an update on our progress: the first day had gone according to plan, and tomorrow we'd be arriving at the area under investigation. The region was apparently a fairly safe stretch of sea that was home to barely any monsters. However, the ghost ship was lurking there now. Shipping routes had needed to be changed, which had, in turn, delayed trade.

This meal is really quiet... I thought. It must have been because the first princess of Highland was present. Even the captain was acting deferential to her title.

The meal ended in a serious atmosphere (just as it had begun), and I returned to my room to get some training in.

I'd been practicing for a while when there was a knock at the door. Furiae entered.

"What's up?" I asked.

"The swaying is making it difficult to sleep..."

She looked slightly ill, so she was probably seasick.

"You going to be okay? Think you'll get some rest?"

"I should be fine once I get tired," she said. "Would you mind talking for a while to take my mind off it?"

"Sure, what about?"

"You've got me there..." she mumbled, seeming to be at a loss.

"Well, could we talk about your homeland?" Fujiyan had always said that discussing a person's homeland was a good topic when you were stuck for conversation, so I put his teachings into practice.

"You want to know about Laphroaig?" she asked. "You certainly are strange..."

She looked dubious, but not against it. Soon, she started talking, and I listened to stories about the place she'd come from. Life in the ruins of the country had not been easy by any means, but it'd been a frugal, peaceful existence. She

even said how she worried about her friends who were still there.

“Well, we can all go there at some point if you want,” I offered.

“You’d do that?”

“If we can find time in between all the hero work.”

“I see...” Though she had a conflicted look on her face, her voice sounded happy.

After several moments of quiet, Furiae spoke again. “Now, tell me about *your* home.”

“Me?” I started. “Well, I already talked about some of it, but...” I told her about my life back in Japan, though with how few friends I’d had, my stories were mostly about games.

“Hm...what else?” I wondered. I’d worried about boring her, but she was nodding along in blatant interest. In particular, she seemed to enjoy the memories I shared of Sasa and Sakurai.

Eventually, she started yawning, and I suggested that she go to sleep.

She looked up at me with drowsy eyes before suddenly smiling. “Going back to my own room is so much effort. Perhaps...I should sleep here.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Come on...”

“That was a joke,” she said. “Rest well, my knight.”

Damn that witch. With the shock of her teasing still flooding my system, any tiredness I’d felt was long gone... My chances of sleeping were now slim to none, so I decided to do some more training.

I grabbed a bottle for a nightcap and then stepped out onto the deck.

Right, let’s find a good spot...

As I weaved my way through the darkness, I heard the faint whooshing sounds of a sharp object slicing through the air. When I activated my *Night Vision* skill, I could see a swordsman—a familiar swordsman—practicing his swings.

I called out to him, but quietly, since it was so late. “Sakurai.”

“Takatsuki,” he replied, seeming slightly surprised. “What’s up?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” I explained, “so I decided to do some training and maybe a bit of stargazing.”

While the sea around us was pitch black, the sky was speckled with countless stars, and the moon hung among them.

“I’ll join you,” he said, sheathing his sword and sitting down next to me.

“Weren’t you practicing your swings?” I asked.

“I’ve already done over a thousand reps, so figured I should take a break anyway.”

Sakurai sure had passion. I recalled that he used to stay late at school every evening for club stuff too.

I’d brought a glass with me to drink from, and I passed it over to Sakurai. Then, I said, “*Water Magic: Ice Creation.*” Another glass made of ice manifested in my hand.

Sakurai stared at my handmade glass. “Convenient,” he remarked, a touch of amusement in his voice.

I poured wine for both of us, and we toasted.

Thinking back, I’d done something similar with Fujiyan on the airship. That was a nice memory. I let the sea breeze play over me as I sipped at the wine in the ice glass.

Looking over to Sakurai’s drink, I saw that the liquid in his glass had barely dropped.

Right, he didn’t drink much... Though the look on his face made me feel like there was a reason for that beyond just him being a lightweight on this occasion.

“You seem down, Sakurai.”

“What?” He looked surprised, then laughed slightly. “I’ve been told that...I’m the only one who can defeat the Great Demon Lord... If I fail, that’s the end of everything.”

I sputtered in shock. *The End?*

“Who said that?” I asked.

“It was Estelle...apparently. At least, she spoke to Noelle. But, since Ira can see the future...”

“Don’t you think that’s putting a bit too much pressure on you?”

“Yeah...but there’s no getting around it.” He smiled as he looked my way, like he was trying to make sure I didn’t worry.

“Your friends can help, right? Though, I haven’t seen Yokoyama with you.”

“Yeah, we didn’t expect to fight anything in Cameron, so we only brought the bare minimum number of knights. Saki’s doing other jobs back in Highland.”

“I see.”

Sakurai was one of the most important people in this world, so frankly, I thought they should be taking better care of him.

After that, I changed topics to ease the tension. We just discussed different stuff, like how things were going with Yokoyama as his fiancée, how our other classmates were doing, and so on. Sakurai had always been a good conversationalist, so he happily followed my lead and we kept talking. My friend was able to do just about anything in this world, but that listless look from earlier weighed on my mind.

However, since we had to do the investigation tomorrow, we only spoke for around an hour before heading to bed for the night.

It was the second day of the voyage, and we’d nearly reached our destination. Despite the still-clear skies, the atmosphere was dark—a thick mist curled above the waves, limiting visibility to only a few meters.

“My knight...” Furiae began ominously.

“The mist is like a miasma...” I said. “It’ll overtake us soon.”

“I have a bad feeling. Be careful.”

“Furiae, you should head into the cabin of the ship.”

“No. The mage and warrior need me to look after you.”

Really? This is the first I’ve heard of it. Guess they weren’t very confident in my abilities...

“Noelle, it’s dangerous,” Sakurai warned. “You should head inside.”

“I am the Priestess of the Sun. I can at least protect myself.”

“Right, but...” With everyone choosing to remain on the deck of the ship, Sakurai seemed at a loss, and so did Princess Noelle’s guards.

“I won’t lose, Furiae,” snapped Princess Noelle.

“You should hide if you’re scared,” Furiae countered.

That’s right... They’re still arguing...

Well, they both had magic skills, so they probably *could* protect themselves.

As that thought flashed through my head, I heard the faint sound of singing. It was a familiar melody, just like I’d heard in Labyrinthos...

“*Siren Song!*” I yelled.

At once, the sailors all covered their ears.

Siren Song was a *Charm* skill that captivated those who heard it. Even Sakurai had his ears covered.

“Sakurai, you good?” I asked.

“Y-Yeah... I’m fine.”

He certainly didn’t *look* fine. If he’d been in sunlight, then this sort of debuff wouldn’t have done anything, but the sun couldn’t penetrate the deep fog.

“Princess!” I cried. “Can you do something for him?”

“Right!” Furiae replied immediately. Charm magic was considered to be a type of curse, so Furiae’s magic could break *Siren Song*’s hold. She turned her focus to Sakurai.

Moon Magic: Anticurse.

Her spell quickly washed over him, clearing the intoxicating song from his mind.

“Thanks, Furiae,” said Sakurai.

“Get yourself together, Ryousuke,” she replied.

With her skills as the Priestess of the Moon, it had thankfully been an easy fix. Furiae moved to the other crew members and started casting the same magic on them.

As I peered around the deck, I spotted someone else who was suffering.

“Princess Noelle!” I shouted, hurrying over to her.

“Sir Makoto... My apologies, but I am unused to such situations.”

“You shouldn’t push yourself. Please, go inside.”

“No!” she exclaimed. “I can use healing magic. I’ll be useful if anyone gets hurt.” Her eyes trailed Furiae, who was casting *Anticurse* on each of the sailors.

Yeah...there was no chance that Princess Noelle was going to hide away and do nothing.

Suddenly, Sakurai yelled out, “Takatsuki!” and pointed to the sea.

I could hear creaking wood as rough waves tossed our ship around. The motion made me stumble until I was hanging over the edge of the railing, and Princess Noelle followed right behind me. I had to grab her arm when it looked like she would fall.

“My thanks.”

“I really wish you’d go where it’s safe...” I told her. She just shook her head.

Sakurai clambered over to us with Furiae at his side. “Takatsuki, the ghost ship!”

“That’s it?” I asked.

Slowly, a battered vessel slipped into view, parting the thick mist.

Siren Song still filled the air, growing louder as the ship drew near.

“Strange...” Furiae murmured. “I can’t feel any necromancy.”

“You can’t?” I asked.

“No. It might be called a ghost ship, but there are no undead.”

“That’s odd. Every witness so far has reported it to be haunted,” said Princess Noelle.

We all tilted our heads at the ship.

“So, what do we do about it?” Sakurai asked me.

“I guess we’ll have to board it and take a look.” We *had* been tasked with investigating, so that was the only thing we could do.

There were over a hundred meters between our ship and the ghost ship. It was definitely not a gap I could clear...

“Sakurai, can you fly?” I asked.

“Yeah. I can carry you.”

“Princess, wait here. And Princess Noelle, look after her, please.”

“Why?! I’ll come too!” Furiae protested, but that wasn’t happening.

“It’s dangerous,” Sakurai told her. “Stay here with Noelle.” He also didn’t seem to have any inclination to take her aboard.

“Be careful,” Princess Noelle said.

“I will,” Sakurai assured her. “Takatsuki, let’s go.”

He grabbed my arm, and his *Flight* skill made my body float in the air.

“Don’t get hurt, my knight,” Furiae called out to me.

“I won’t.”

Sakurai and I waved to the girls before flying over to the ship.

I peered cautiously around as my feet touched the deck.

“There’s no one here,” Sakurai murmured.

“*Scout* isn’t picking up anything either.”

The deck beneath our feet was rotten in places, so we needed to be careful. I saw that the door to the ship’s cabin was also broken, so I took a look inside with *Night Vision*.

Nothing. The interior was a mess, but there was no hint of people or monsters

within.

“It looks like a plain old shipwreck,” I said.

“Yeah, but *Siren Song* means there’re monsters around.”

That much was true—the singing had been coming from *somewhere* in the fog.

“Where’s the source, though?” I wondered.

“I can’t tell what direction the voices are coming from.”

The song seemed to emanate from several directions at once, so it was impossible to narrow it down.

“Hmm...”

I decided it was time to go big.

“Elementals,” I called out. We were on the ocean, so there were plenty of water elementals around.

“*Hiii!*”

A huge amount of mana swirled around us, causing the decrepit ship to creak. It would probably break if I went too far.

“*Water Magic: Clear, Oh Fog.*” At my words, the mist shrouding the ship vanished.

Success!

“Takatsuki, look!” Sakurai yelled, pointing into the sky.

Above us, many female monsters were flapping their wings, and I noticed that their upper halves were covered in scales.

That’s right. Sirens can fly, so the threat isn’t necessarily on the ship.

Then, I saw something even weirder—a creature the size of a small mountain was floating on the water. On top of that, it had more than one head. Each head sat at the end of a long, snake-like neck, and all the necks were writhing around the gigantic, hill-like monstrosity.

“A hydra...” Sakurai muttered.

That made sense. It was a many-headed dragon, so it had to be a hydra. However, I was getting the sense that something about it wasn't quite right...

"No, wait..." I said, taking a closer look. "It's...a blight dragon..."

That thing just didn't look like a normal monster—there were over a hundred heads wriggling around it, almost obscuring the body.

And, somewhat astonishingly, the heads were eating each other.

Those that lost fights against their brethren were bitten off, and the severed heads fell into the sea with huge splashes. The roiling creature was dyed dull red with blood. Even the seawater around it was stagnant and filthy-looking.

"What's our plan?" Sakurai asked.

"We should return to our own ship first," I suggested. Sakurai agreed, so we flew back to the galleon.

Furiae and Princess Noelle immediately pounced on us.

"My knight!" Furiae cried. "What is that disgusting thing?!"

"It's...foul..." Princess Noelle said haltingly.

The two of them scowled.

"Well, it's a blight dragon," I told them. "Sakurai and I fought something similar in Labyrinthos."

"I don't know what it's doing here, but we can't just leave it." Sakurai seemed ready for a fight.

"Wait! At least take some..." Princess Noelle trailed off, looking around, but all the sailors had sunk to the ship's deck. "Wh-What...?"

"People can lose their will to fight just by seeing a blight monster," I explained.

Of course, our ship had originally been sent out to investigate, so there weren't many accomplished fighters aboard. Some of the sailors had even fainted. Things weren't looking good—we wouldn't even be able to sail at this rate.

"My knight, if *Fear* is the only thing stopping them from moving, then I should

be able to help,” Furiae said.

“Thanks. Please help them,” Sakurai told her. “Takatsuki, let’s go.”

“Got it. I’ll back you up.”

“W-Wait,” interrupted Princess Noelle. “That beast was originally a hydra, no? It should have potent poison.”

Hydras were *famous* for their poison. I took a closer look at the reddish-black water around it.

Is that its poison? I didn’t want to get anywhere near it...

“Ryousuke, Sir Makoto, this will help.” Princess Noelle clasped her hands together and started to chant.

A spell? Before long, there was a faint light surrounding Sakurai and me.

“This is *Barrier of Light*,” explained Princess Noelle, “It should defend against poison and magic attacks for a while.”

That *Sun Magic* spell was saint rank!

“Thanks, Noelle.”

“Thank you, Princess Noelle.”

With that spell covering us, Sakurai and I went once more toward the blight dragon. Sakurai was flying through the air while I skimmed along the sea. Sakurai had offered to carry me, but I’d had a different idea.

“We should split up,” I suggested. “I’ll draw its attention and you take it down.”

“Doesn’t that put you in a fair bit of danger?”

“I’m not an easy target on the water. Remember Labyrinthos?” I smiled, hoping to assuage his worry.

He nodded then flew higher, heading around the back of the beast.

I couldn’t tell whether it had even noticed us—those heads just kept tearing into each other.

I should open up with something big.

“xxxxxx (*Elementals, help me!*)”

“*Sure!*” came a chorus of responses, and I felt the surge of mana welling up from them.

I love being out on the sea... There are water elementals everywhere...

Water Magic: Yamata no Orochi.

It was the same king rank spell I’d used in Labyrinthos. I figured I’d try it since it’d worked against a blight dragon once before.

As I cast my spell, a huge, eight-headed serpent rose from the water, hissing. The hydra might be the size of a hill, but my *Yamata no Orochi* was no smaller, and it swiftly attacked the blight dragon.

The cacophony of hundreds of screeching heads filled the air, and the noise was horrible enough to sap one’s sanity.

Is Sakurai coping?

My *Yamata no Orochi* and the blight dragon smashed into each other, whipping the sea into massive crests as they fought.

That should at least get its attention. Now...

My *Listen* skill soon picked up on the sound of Sakurai’s attack.

Flash, Sword of Light!

He slashed his blade, and a crest of light lit up like a flashbulb, tearing right through the blight dragon. Its harrowing screeching continued, but the noise took on an edge of pain.

I was sure we’d gotten it. There were over a hundred heads, but almost all of them had dropped to the ocean as its body split in two.

Nothing could survive that. We *had* to be done.

But then, I heard the singing. A voice, deeply unsettling.

Suddenly, the blighted screeching started back up again. The hydra’s body began to foam, and its heads sprouted up once more. These new heads had no eyes—they were just bone covered in rotten skin.

The blight dragon had regenerated, albeit in a way that was sacrilege to anything living.

“Takatsuki!” Sakurai called as he flew over. “The song is healing it! We need to take the sirens out first.”

“Sure, but there’re so many of them. It’s not going to be easy.” I spied many bat-like sirens whirling around the blight dragon. “Think you can pull that off again?” I asked.

“If I had sunlight, yeah, but with this fog...”

Though I’d cleared it away, it had deepened once again, blocking out the sunlight.

Well then, first things first—clear out the mist again.

As I made that decision, the sirens’ voices came together in a haunting chorus, and the wind billowed, darkening the sky further.

“Clouds...?” Sakurai murmured. Suddenly, it began to rain.

“They’re controlling the weather,” I said. Apparently, the sirens had realized that they were facing off against the Hero of Light.

That disgusting blight dragon was coming toward us...along with the sirens swirling around it. Our ship (along with Furiae and Noelle) was behind us, so we couldn’t let the monsters get any closer.

With my low rank magic, I had no real offensive capabilities. Sakurai’s magic blade was our best chance for defeating them, but weather magic was currently blocking the sun.

“I’ll have to—” Sakurai began.

“Wait, wait,” I interrupted, stopping him before he rushed in without a plan. Things would be much easier if I could clear the skies again, but a huge number of sirens were still controlling their spell.

At this point, a direct contest would be risky.

“Let’s get the priestesses to help,” I suggested.

“Noelle and Furiae?!” Sakurai exclaimed. “It’s too dangerous for girls!”

Sakurai seemed against it. But my whole party (besides me) was made up of girls, so it wasn't something that I considered.

"It's fine. Lucy, Sasa, and even Princess Sophia have helped me out in the past. Sakurai, you should rely more on the people around you."

"I...suppose?"

He seemed to have a bad habit of trying to do *everything* on his own. By contrast, I couldn't do *anything* on my own, so I had no real issues asking for help.

With that decided, we returned to our ship. There, we were greeted by two worried priestesses.

I headed over to Furiae.

"What is it, my knight?"

"Princess, help me out." I grabbed her hand and leaped from the ship.

"What? Ahhhh?!" she screamed. "Th-That was abrupt."

"We're in a bit of a pickle here."

She frowned. "You are? That's not like you."

"I need to buy time. The combination of the blight dragon and sirens is an issue."

I pulled her along using both *Walk on Water* and *Flow* until we were almost skiing along the sea.

The blight dragon took a long, sweeping turn as it approached. Above it, the sirens noticed us coming, and then those rancid hydra heads began snapping in our direction.

"That singing is a *Necromancy* skill," stated Furiae. "It's crudely done, though."

"You can tell?"

"Of course. I'm the Priestess of the Moon, after all. Hmph." She grinned wickedly. "I'll just interfere with it a little."

I didn't even have time to ask what her plan was; Furiae suddenly began to sing. Her voice was almost angelic, and it made the sirens singing—which had been fairly pleasant until then—sound like nothing more than noise.

Even as I rocketed across the water to avoid the attacks, I couldn't help but be entranced by Furiae's song.

"You're quite the singer, Princess."

"Flattery will get you nowhere. Look over there." She pointed at the blight dragon. Several of its heads were screeching and falling apart.

"That was you?!"

"It was. My song interfered with theirs," she explained, straightening proudly.

"Think you can do anything about the sirens?" I asked.

"Listen here..." she chided. "You know I don't do well with outright offensive spells. Can't *you* do anything?"

"Water is the weakest of the seven elements..." I muttered.

"That's quite the problem."

We looked at each other. Furiae's song had slowed down the blight dragon, but the sirens still needed to be dealt with...

"It's so cold here," Furiae complained, hugging her shoulders. "Roses was much warmer in comparison."

"Hmmm."

Suddenly, an idea struck. It *was* chilly here—we were practically as north as we could go on the western continent, which meant that the temperature was much lower.

"Got it! Sorry, Princess, but it's about to get even colder."

"What?!" she demanded, looking aghast.

The sirens had summoned thick clouds which were covering the sky, but *we* could use them too.

"xxx, xxx? (*Hey, Elementals?*)"

“What?”

Water Magic: Snowfall.

“Wh-What did you do?!” Furiae yelled.

Well, I kinda expected that response—after all, I had just conjured a bout of heavy snow.

“Made it snow,” I answered simply.

“And why would you do that when it’s already so cold?!” she demanded. She pulled me into a tense arm lock. *Owww...*

“Stop, stop, Princess! Look, they can’t fly properly anymore, can they?” I pointed up to the sirens, who were now reeling through the air. Their wings and bodies were catching the snow and making it harder to fly, so they couldn’t spare the effort to sing.

Ga ha ha, sirens! It’s your fault for changing the weather like this!

“That’s all well and good,” Furiae said, “but how are you going to finish them off?! Snow isn’t going to kill that dragon!”

She...was right.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re just buying time. Our hero’s going to bring it down.”

“You mean Ryousuke? Can he manage it in this weather?” she asked, looking up into the sky. The only things visible were the clouds—now even thicker than before—and the heavy snow.

It was the worst kind of weather for the Hero of Light since sunlight was literally the source of his power.

Just then, I saw a flash, like something off in the distance was reflecting light. It came from the same direction as our ship.

“Princess Noelle will manage something,” I assured Furiae. “She’s the Priestess of the Sun for a reason.”

“Hmm, I suppose,” she mumbled unhappily. “It is absolutely freezing, though. Warm me up.” She put her arms around me, and her softness pressed into my

back.

“P-Princess?! I’m making sure the snow doesn’t hit us, so—” I was going to say that she didn’t need to hold onto me like that, but she quickly interrupted me.

“Shut up,” she snapped. “That doesn’t make it any less cold, so you need to warm me up.” She clung to me tighter.

A-Ack. RPG Player stops Charm, but plain old temptation still works on me... Uh...uh... Right! Elementals, help me!

Water Magic: Blizzard.

The heavy snow around us got even thicker, and the cold froze the sea beneath our feet. The ocean had become a vast, snowy plain. To shield us from the weather, I created a dome that was large enough for Furiae and me to huddle beneath.

“What is this?” Furiae asked in wonder, gently touching the wall of the dome.

“I guess it’s...an igloo?”

“An igloo?”

That was a word from my old world, so naturally, she hadn’t heard it before.

“People in snowy countries build them as a shelter for dealing with the cold. It’s warm, right?”

“Well, that’s not quiiite what I meant...” She crossed her arms in slight disagreement, but then admitted, “It *is* rather warm, though.”

“Right? Also, look at the sirens.”

I pointed to the monsters—one by one, they were gradually tumbling to the iced-over ocean.

“Ugh...gross...” she muttered, pulling back.

“It turned out all right in the end. At least we took the sirens down.”

“W-Well, I suppose so...”

Just then, I felt a massive wave of mana rippling out from our ship.

“Looks like Sakurai’s ready,” I said.

A blinding burst of light shone forth, so bright that it hurt my eyes and pierced through the blizzard.

Now that the monsters were weaker, it was time to end this.

“xxxx! xxxx! (*Elementals! Time to finish it!*)”

“*We’re tired, though...*”

Crap, they’d had enough. What now? I didn’t have the time to persuade them.

I know! Drawing my dagger from its sheath, I summoned the elementals to merge with the blade. This was the skill Prince Leonardo had taught me.

Before my eyes, the dagger began to glow blue, and it chimed like a bell. I pointed my blade to the sky, then let loose a massive blue crescent, which shot off into the clouds.

“My knight!” exclaimed Furiae. “The dragon is that way!”

Despite her panic, I smiled back at her. “It’ll all come together.”

“What are you...oh.”

Halfway through her question, my slash tore through the clouds, and sunlight shone through the gap. In the distance, the silhouette of a single, tiny figure was bathed in the sun’s rays.

It was the Hero of Light, his body shining in a rainbow of sunbeams.

“*Sword of Light: Prismatic Flash!*” he bellowed, swinging his illuminated blade down into the blight monster.

This spell’s power exceeded even his previous attack—the dense blade of mana poured down onto the blight dragon.

It screeched, falling to pieces as it let out a last breath. The few surviving sirens didn’t stand a chance—they were obliterated as well.

In the aftermath, only six pillars of light stretched up into the sky, leaving nothing else behind.

“Great, we did it,” I said, feeling relieved.

“It was...rather anticlimactic,” Furiae commented.

The two of us crossed the frozen sea and climbed aboard our ship. Sakurai had already flown back.

“Nice one, Sakurai,” I told him.

“Thanks, Takatsuki.”

We high-fived.

“How’d you do that without the sun?” I asked.

“Noelle gave me the mana,” he explained. “It acts the same way as the sunlight does...or maybe even better.”

“Huh.”

Princess Noelle wasn’t normally around during dangerous situations, so he hadn’t gotten many chances to fight alongside her. It was a good thing she’d been here this time.

Sakurai turned to the priestesses. “You were both so close to that thing! Wasn’t it dangerous for you two?!”

Apparently the girls’ proximity to the blight monster had worried him.

“That was how we got rid of *Siren Song*—Furiae was also the one who realized they were using *Necromancy*.”

“Hmmm, still...” Sakurai seemed unconvinced. “Bringing them onto the front lines feels...”

Well, he and I seemed to disagree on that point at least.

“Noelle,” Furiae said haughtily. “We defeated the blight dragon thanks to me.”

“What are you talking about?” argued Princess Noelle. “The mana came from me.”

“Hmph, while you shivered away on the ship?”

“Was it not Sir Makoto’s spell that took the sirens down? *You* were shivering

in the snow, weren't you?"

"Well, I was more of a help than you."

"I don't know where you got that idea—I won."

They were glaring at each other once again.

"Those two—" I began.

"—are never going to get along," Sakurai finished.

He and I moved to hold them back before the situation broke out into a real fight.

"Still, you *were* a help," conceded Furiae. "After all, my knight has no way of attacking..."

"And you *did* buy time for me to give mana to Ryouzuke..." Princess Noelle admitted. "If you hadn't, I'm not sure what we would have done."

The two of them fell silent and started to...look more relaxed?!

"It's cold out here. Let's go and have some tea to warm up," Princess Noelle suggested. She took Furiae's hand.

"As long as it's not poisoned." Despite the barb, Furiae didn't shake off Princess Noelle, and she actually followed along.



Oh! They *were* getting along! That was fantastic. Sakurai and I exchanged looks and shared a laugh.

I was exhausted as well, so some warm soup sounded perfect.

However, before I even took a step, someone spoke to me. “Uh...Hero of Roses?”

I turned around and locked eyes with a sailor. “Yes, what is it?” I asked.

“We’re extremely grateful to you for defeating the blight dragon. We understand that there was no other choice...but we have a problem.”

I looked at him questioningly, and he quickly clarified, “Your spell froze the sea, so we cannot move the ship... Could you melt the water?”

“Ah.” Looking around us, I realized that the sea was still covered in ice as far as I could see.

I went too far! I need to get it back to normal. H-Hey, elementaaaals...

They didn’t answer.

S-Seriously?

Well, they *were* whimsical. Sometimes they’d happily help you, only to ignore you soon after. They’d already helped me so much today, so I’d figured that they might still be around...

I...was going to have to melt the sea on my own, wasn’t I?

There were no other mages on board with a *Water Magic* skill, so I was left with the sorry task of fixing it. Though, it *was* me that froze the ocean to begin with... Oh well.

I sighed.

Hours later, I was still melting ice, but there was so much left.

Sakurai had offered to help, but I’d told him to rest since he was probably tired from defeating the blight dragon.

I might end up spending all night on this...

Just as that thought crossed my mind, someone came up behind me. I turned around and saw Furiae bundled up in a thick coat.

“What’s with the jacket, Princess?” I asked.

“I borrowed it from Noelle since it’s so cold.”

Those two...were friendly enough to borrow and lend clothes?

“Sorry,” I said. “It’s going to take a while.”

“That’s fine. I came outside because I didn’t want you to have to do it all on your own. Plus, I didn’t want to get in the way of Noelle and Ryousuke.”

I was slightly surprised to hear that. I was sure that Furiae had feelings for Sakurai and wanted nothing more than to get in the way of their romance.

That thought must have shown on my face.

“My knight.”

“Hm?”

“You are mistaken,” she stated. “I don’t want to take Ryousuke from Noelle. I’m just grateful that he was my ally—my *only* ally—when I was captured by Highland.”

“Really?”

“I have you, the mage, and the warrior now. All of you are my allies as well, so...I’m fine.”

She stared out at the icy sea with an enigmatic expression, and I couldn’t really tell what she was thinking.

“Let’s head back to Cameron as soon as possible,” I suggested. “Lucy and Sasa are waiting for us.”

“Let’s. Shall I help you?” asked Furiae.

“Hm, but you can’t use *Water Magic* skills, so...”

Several bouts of trial and error later, we managed to use *Synchro* and *Charm* to get the water elementals back to normal. After about an hour, all the ice was melted, and we could head safely back to the capital.

Epilogue: Banquet in Cameron

After our battle with the blighted hydra, we returned to Cameron, and I met Estelle once more in the Temple of Time.

“Good work on the investigation,” she told me.

I’d thought Sakurai or Princess Noelle would be here as well, but apparently not. I had also invited Furiae, but she’d decided not to come.

“The investigation was one thing,” I said, “but the blight dragon was a whole other ordeal.”

“Yes, I have heard the rumors in the town. The Hero of Light and the Hero of Roses saved Cameron. Quite the feather in your cap, disciple of Noah.”

Was that supposed to be praise? Her eyes seemed as cold as ever, and under that gaze, I decided to complain a little.

“You could have warned me about the blight dragon,” I griped. “Honestly, things were *really* touch and go for a while. My other party members weren’t even there. Can’t you...see the future?”

She was silent in response.

“Lady Estelle?” I pressed.

“I could not.”

“What?”

Her shoes clacked on the floor as she walked over to me. That cold gaze morphed into a slightly awkward look.

“I already told you—your zealous devotion to Noah means that I cannot see your future. None of it.”

“None...at all?”

“Indeed. It’s a real problem,” she admitted. Her tone of voice seemed more casual now.

“S-Sorry for the—”

She cut me off. “If I had known of its presence, I would have sent more soldiers. That ghost ship may have been a trap set for the Hero of Light, and the situation certainly put him at risk. You...have my thanks.”

Her face was the kindest I’d ever seen it.

“Sakurai’s strong, so he would’ve been fine, right?”

“No. He is the only one that can defeat Iblis. The Hero of Light is our only trump card, and we cannot afford to lose him.”

“Then we need to protect him, right?” I asked.

She stared steadily at me without speaking.

“Lady...Estelle?”

“You throw me off. I thought that a disciple of Noah would be more broken, but you’re such a good person. I can understand Sister Eir’s recommendation now, and...” she trailed off into muttering that I couldn’t catch, but then spoke up more clearly again. “As Ira’s priestess, you have my thanks. Is there anything you desire?”

Her tone was as curt as ever, but she seemed more considerate of me now.
She’s asking if I want anything?

“Not really,” I replied.

“I see. Inform me if you think of a request.” At that, she concluded our meeting and saw me out.

In the end, that report had gone rather smoothly.



That night, we all ended up at a party.

“Fujiyan, what’s the celebration for?” I asked.

“To show gratitude for the two heroes who defeated the blight dragon. The head of the Franz Company proposed the idea.”

I glanced around.

The food was amazing, and there was a band playing elegant music. Everyone was in formal wear—I saw a sea of dignified dresses and the like—and partygoers were talking and dancing.

This celebration even stood up to Highland's event.

The densest group of people was clustered around Sakurai, who also had Princess Noelle at his side.

Well, he is the guest of honor, after all.

"You are aware, my esteemed Tackie, that you are also a guest of honor, no?" Fujiyan prompted, obviously using his *Mind Reading*.

"I'll just grab some food and stay on the outskirts," I said. "People won't be able to find me if I use *Stealth*."

"I believe you are the first person I have met who would use such a skill at a party... I was asked to introduce you to the Franz Company head later, so I would appreciate you being present for that." Fujiyan looked at me with a long-suffering expression before heading off to give greetings to his other acquaintances.

I piled food onto my plate, using *Stealth* to draw as little attention as possible. Ultimately, I wanted to spend the party on my own.

Cameron was a trade hub and a cultural melting pot, and that meant that there were dishes from all over the continent. I'd ended up getting carried away and had picked up too much food. Could I even eat it all?

"What are you doing here?" Lucy asked. She was wearing a daring red dress. "You're the guest of honor."

"People are looking for you," Sasa added. She had a cute dress on as well.

"The food in Cameron is great, so I was investigating," I replied.

The buffet featured food similar to French cuisine, along with dishes that seemed close to Indian, Chinese, and Japanese food. All of it was delicious.

"Really?" asked Lucy. "I've been talking with so many people that I haven't had a chance to try anything yet."

“Yeah, a ton of people want to speak to us since we’re in your party,” Sasa remarked. Both of them looked tired.

Lots of folks in Cameron were fairly proactive with networking, and that was part of why I was hiding—if strangers were talking to me, I wouldn’t be able to eat.

“You could both use *Stealth* as well.”

“Hey, you shouldn’t go that far for a party...” Lucy protested.

“No fair, leaving us and going off on your own!” Sasa exclaimed. “Gimme some of that food!”

“Can I try it too?”

The pair of them proceeded to pick pieces of food from my plate.

“Take what you like. I can’t eat it all on my own anyway...” I admitted.

As the three of us ate, a beauty in a black dress weaved her way through the crowd and over to us—Furiae.

“You look kinda tired, Princess,” I remarked.

“My knight...explain to me why the people of this country are willing to speak so easily with the Priestess of the Moon...” Her expression looked utterly confused.

The largest group of people was around Sakurai, the Hero of Light. The second largest, though, had surrounded Furiae.

“Probably because Highland officially announced that they’re cooperating with you,” I explained. “The people of Cameron are taking the opportunity to make connections.”

“But...why? I’m supposed to be an ill omen...”

“From what I’ve seen, the people in Cameron aspire to have pleasant relationships with others,” I answered.

“I see... Though I cannot understand it.” She sounded worn out.

Honestly, I felt the same way.

I brought her some food since she was tired. Then, I spoke to the head of the Franz Company like Fujiyan wanted. When I did, I got spotted by a few nobles, so I was caught up in conversation for a while.

As the party drew to a close, we would've normally headed back to our own lodging, but apparently, the hotel hosting the party had a room reserved for me—a single suite.

Since it was there, I decided to use it.

However, Fujiyan stopped me as I collected the key.

“My esteemed Tackie, I assume you have a guest room for tonight... I must advise you to not stay alone.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

I'd been told that the booking was for a single room.

“I believe that certain nobles who wish to get close to you—that is, to the Hero of Roses—will have organized some honeypots to hound you. If you are in the room alone, women will make their way in.”

“S-Seriously?”

That was crazy.

“Hold on,” Lucy said, her sharp ears catching the conversation. “You’re spending the night with someone? I’ll join you, then.”

“No fair, Lu!” whined Sasa. “I’m coming too!”

“Oh? Everyone is staying with you? I will too, then.” Furiae had also invited herself.

I guess the four of us would be spending the night in the same room. *There goes my chance at a luxury suite... Well, whatever.*

We headed up to the top floor.

“It’s huge!” Sasa cheered as she entered the room.

“Aya, this bed could hold at least five people!” exclaimed Lucy.

“Oh, there are even snacks,” Furiae added.

The three girls were all exploring my room.

Well, it *was* a good thing that the bed was scarily big—it was wide enough so that all three of the girls could sleep on it. I'd probably take the sofa.

I glanced out of the window. This country had so many casinos that the streets were still lit, and since the bars were also open late, nightlife here was really something.

I kind of wish we could spend more time sightseeing...

I'd told Princess Sophia that we'd be back within a week, though, so we had to leave soon if we were going to make it.

I was thinking about what sightseeing I'd like to do tomorrow, when suddenly, I heard a noise from behind me.

"What are you two doing?" I asked Lucy and Sasa. There was a collection of wine on the table spaced out among various snacks, like fruit. The spread was similar to room service, but it had been here before we'd arrived.

"We didn't get to drink during the party," Lucy explained.

"Right," Sasa chimed in. "This is our after-party."

You two have so much energy, I thought. *Also, where did Furiae go?*

I looked around the room and finally found her in the middle of the bed, asleep and breathing softly. She was probably exhausted from all the conversation earlier.

You could be a bit warier, I complained mentally, but I pulled a blanket over her.

"You're being awfully nice to Fuuri," remarked Lucy.

"Did something happen on your adventure together?" Sasa asked.

They both stared at me.

"Nothing," I replied. "That blight dragon was just tough."

After that, I toasted with the two of them, leaning back on the soft sofa and sipping at a colorful cocktail.

There were all sorts of pictures hanging on the wall, and the room was filled with luxurious furnishings. The tabletop (which was littered with food) looked like marble, and the plates were inlaid with gold. Even the glasses were complex and decorative. Everything seemed so expensive.

It's kinda unsettling...

Honestly, I felt out of place.

Lucy and Sasa must've seen my feelings written on my face.

"What's up?"

"You seem down."

Really, there was no getting stuff past them.

"I can't relax since the room is so fancy," I admitted.

They looked blankly at me.

"Really? I love it."

"Yup, I'd happily spend every night in a room like this."

"Really?" I asked. I was the only one that felt awkward in the too-big room, it seemed.

"Guess I'll need to earn more money then," I mused. "Get someplace better than the house in Macallan." I seemed to remember some magazine saying that a man's worth was dictated by his income.

Lucy draped herself onto my side. "Well, I'll be fine as long as I'm with you," she murmured, pushing her chest into me.

Hang on... You're not wearing anything under that dress, are you?!

"I'd be happy with the guild floor if it was with you," Sasa said. Her grip was tight and competitive on my other side.

"I couldn't make you sleep there forever," I protested.

"Really?"

Once that conversation died down, I spent the next while relaxing between the two of them.

At some point, there was a knock at the door. It soon opened to reveal a scantily clad woman who apparently had something to discuss with the Hero of Roses. However, she left in disappointment when she saw Lucy and Sasa on either side of me.

Fujiyan was right... Cameron's a scary place.



I kept talking with them for a while, but fighting the blight dragon had evidently exhausted me more than I'd thought—I passed out partway through my normal training.



“Morning, Makoto.”

“Noah? Good morning.”

I'd awoken in her realm.

“Mornin', Mako!” Eir said cheerily. “Well done—you took down another blight dragon! Roses will be in an even better position now!” She wrapped me in a hug.

“Hey, no tempting Makoto!” Noah protested.

“What's the harm?” She started tousling my hair and making cooing noises.

“Things have been hectic recently,” I complained. “We stopped the stampede in Macallan *and* defeated a blight dragon in Cameron. Can I get a break now?”

I thought I should be able to take things easy for a while. And though I did still have to visit Springrogue and Great Keith, that was just to give greetings.

The two goddesses exchanged meaningful looks.

“You see, Makoto, I don't think you can relax just yet,” Noah began.

Eir explained a bit further. “It looks like all of this turmoil might've just been a diversion from the Snake Sect's real plan...”

“What?” *No, no, no!* There'd been ten thousand monsters, an ancient dragon, *and* a blight dragon! Hadn't I done enough?

“You should go to Springrogue next. Freya asked for help.”

I sighed. Well, I *had* been intending to travel there anyway.

“Apparently, there's something going on in the Forest of Fiends,” said Noah.

“Really?!” I exclaimed. The Forest of Fiends was a massive dungeon located in the center of the Great Forest. People said it was even tougher than Labyrinthos, and it's supposed to have more dangerous monsters too...

“That’s...going to be an absurd challenge,” I said.

“We’re not asking you to go on your own!” Noah clarified. “Freya’s gonna give you support—she’s rallying some of the elves and beastmen to help out!”

A lot of Springrogue’s inhabitants were demihumans. In other words, elves and beastpeople.

“Lucy’s from Springrogue, isn’t she?” I asked.

“Yup! Her grandfather is the chief of one of the biggest villages. Also, her mother’s the Hero of Springrogue, so you’ll get to meet her.”

“Oooh...” *Meeting a hero in the elven village! Sounds like fun.* “I guess I’ll head there next,” I decided.

Noah seemed happy about my enthusiasm. “Oh, you’re all fired up now!”

“Yay, Mako!” cheered Eir. “Love you. ☆”

“Stop hugging him!”

At some point, while the two goddesses were playing tug-of-war with me, I passed out.



“Mmrhg...”

I awoke in a luxurious room.

Right, it’s that fancy hotel. I looked toward the massive bed and saw the three girls sleeping in a pile. As I walked over, Lucy’s long ears twitched as her eyes snapped open.

“Oh, good morning, Makoto.”

“Morning, Lucy... Uh, why are you naked?”

“It was hot.”

I knew that would be the answer...but I still asked every time.

“You should have joined us,” Lucy said with a teasing grin. “I could’ve told my family that I’d *done* it.”

The mention of Lucy’s family reminded me of the discussion with the

goddesses.

“Oh, right. We’re going to your village in Springrogue next.”

“Huh?” Lucy seemed flabbergasted and her mouth dropped open. “Ah? Wait a minute. What do you mean?”

“I figured we could go visit your family.”

The other two girls began to stir—Lucy’s yell had apparently woken them up.

“What’s wrong, Lu?” murmured Sasa.

“Oh be quiet...” Furiae complained.

But Lucy kept her focus on me. “Wh-What do you mean, see my *family*?!”

“You don’t want to?” I asked.

“Th-That’s not what I meant! Not at all!”

“That’s what we’ll do, then.”

It was decided. Elven villages were a staple in fantasy series, but I had never been to one. I was looking forward to it.

“Uhm, is this an engagement...? A meeting? No, Makoto’s an otherworlder... S-So I should just introduce him as my boyfriend...?” Lucy was muttering away to herself. What brought that on?

Are you doing this on purpose? Noah asked.

You’re a bad man, Mako... chided Eir.

But...I was only doing what you two goddesses told me to...

Neither of them replied. Still, this plan would work out, right?

And so our next destination was decided: we’d be visiting the elven village in Springrogue...and Lucy’s family.

Afterword

It's Isle Osaki here; thank you for buying volume five of *Zero Believers*.

This volume had the Macallan arc, with Mary and Lucas making a splash. They both appeared before Lucy but didn't get illustrations in the first volume. I'm exceedingly grateful that we got to see the two of them illustrated now.

Macallan wasn't part of the original plot for the web version and was a hasty addition. That led to it being rather short, so I've added the Cameron arc to this volume. Did you enjoy it? We didn't visit Cameron in the web version, so this is the first time it's appeared on the page. The web and published versions are slowly diverging, bit by bit. I think that this makes both versions enjoyable to read for people.

Finally, I'd like to thank Tam-U for the wonderful illustrations, Hakuto Shiroi for the adorable characters in the manga version, and my editor N for the various pieces of advice. I'd also like to thank readers of both the web and published versions of this story, and I hope that you'll continue to support *Zero Believers* into the future as well.

Noah

Full clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with Zero
Believers

5

Dragon Menace of Macallan

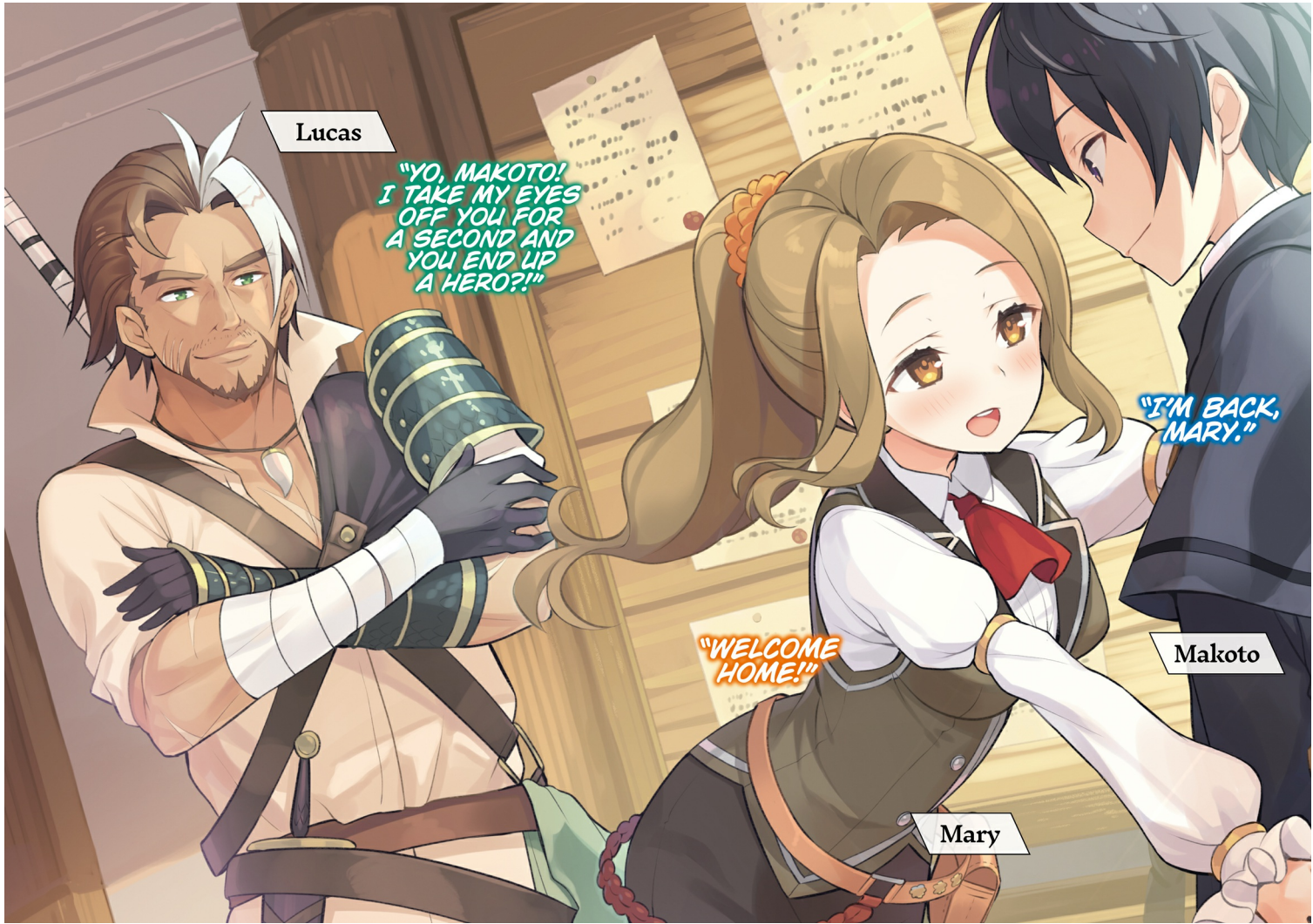
Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

"HELLO,
MAKO☆"

"H-HEY!
STOP IT!"

Eir



Lucas

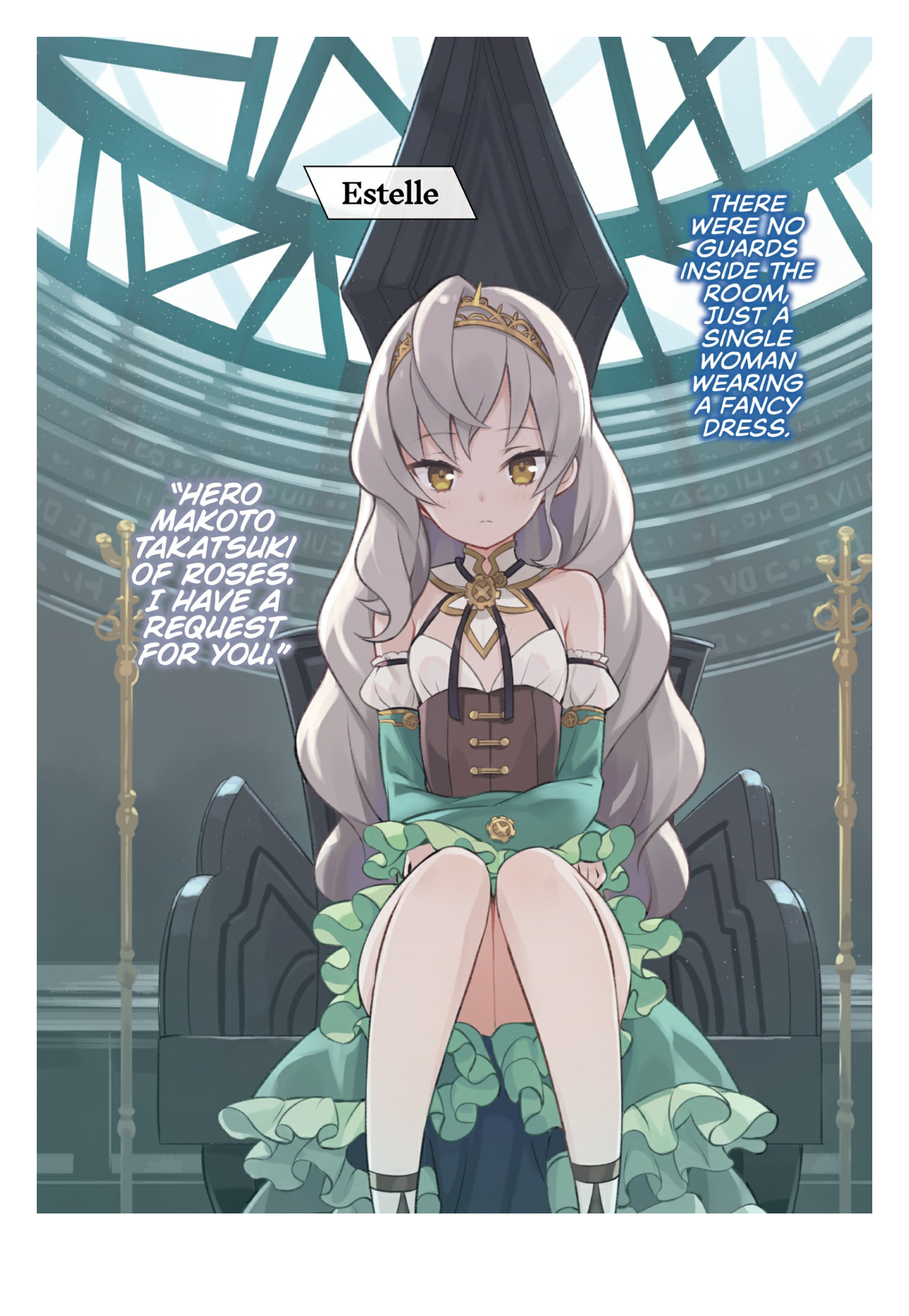
"YO, MAKOTO!
I TAKE MY EYES
OFF YOU FOR
A SECOND AND
YOU END UP
A HERO?!"

"I'M BACK,
MARY."

Makoto

"WELCOME
HOME!"

Mary

A full-page illustration of Estelle from Final Fantasy Fushia Island. She is sitting on a dark, ornate throne in a grand hall with a large, circular, teal-colored architectural feature in the background. Estelle has long, wavy, light purple hair and golden eyes. She is wearing a white and green dress with a brown corset and a gold crown. Her hands are clasped in her lap.

Estelle

THERE
WERE NO
GUARDS
INSIDE THE
ROOM,
JUST A
SINGLE
WOMAN
WEARING
A FANCY
DRESS.

"HERO
MAKOTO
TAKATSUKI
OF ROSES.
I HAVE A
REQUEST
FOR YOU."

Bonus Short Stories

The Hero of Roses and the Priestess of Fate

Presently, I was in the Temple of Time.

“So you will be returning to Roses.”

“Right. But you knew that before I even opened my mouth.”

“Well, I *am* the Priestess of the Goddess of Fate,” said Estelle with a *hmph*, puffing her flat chest up.

I’d thought it would be proper to give our farewells before we left Cameron, but she’d just seen through me anyway.

“Thank you for your help,” I said with a bow. Honestly, considering all the hassle we’d been through with the ghost ship, it was actually *me* that had given *her* the help...but I decided to be the bigger man. Roses was a small country after all—a little kissing up couldn’t hurt!

“Oh...you think *I* should be thanking *you*?” Estelle asked accusingly. “That’s certainly something to say.”

“What?”

“It’s written all over your face.”

Nonono! On my face?! Calm Mind should prevent any of that...

“I can see right through you!” she declared, pointing at me.

That’s kinda rich, coming from someone that can’t see my future.

“Th-That’s Noah’s fault, not mine!”

Is she really not reading my mind?! I think she’s got the skill...

“W-Well, regardless, let’s move on. I would rather not leave a debt unpaid. Come on, tell me what you want,” she demanded.

“Hm, I mean, if you participate in the Northern Front—”

Estelle cut me off. “That’s a given since we’re both part of the Six Nation Alliance. Do you have no personal desires?”

“Not really...”

She pouted at me before seeming to come up with an idea. “Right! Then I’ll read your fortune!”

“My fortune...?” *What does she mean?*

“It’s a divination of your luck,” she explained. “And I’ll tell you now—fortune telling from *me* costs quite a bit!”

“But, you can see the future, right? So what’s the point?”

“How could you say that?” she asked in disbelief. “When I peer into the future, I only see the path that the next few years will take. However, people want to know about their lives over a longer time-frame, and whether they’ll succeed or fall to tragedy. That’s what I’ll foretell!”

“Couldn’t you just look into the future and tell them?” I asked. Estelle paused for a long moment. “Looking decades into the future is the domain of the gods. You need to be a goddess in heaven to do that.”

“Huh...” I was finding out all sorts of things today.

“Now then, I’ll tell your fortune. Let’s see...” Estelle put her hand on my cheek as she spoke, and it kinda tickled. “As for your future... Oh!” She giggled. “I can see it, ‘I can see time!’”

She seemed...excited. And somehow, that line sounded familiar...

“Now... You’ll marry—”

“Hey! Don’t just foretell that kind of thing out of nowhere!” I hurriedly backed away from her. It felt like anything she said would end up as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“It’s just fortune telling, not precognition, so it hardly matters, does it?”

“I feel like your ‘fortune telling’ is more misses than hits, so I’ll pass.”

“Hmph.” She pouted again. “People see it as an honor, though... Well, fine, I

suppose.”

Estelle’s mood seemed to lift as she watched me panic. She was far from the nicest, huh?

“What was that?” she snapped.

“You’re definitely reading my mind now!” I exclaimed.

“Oops.”

There was no point in her hiding it now. *Oh well, I should probably head out before I end up thinking something rude.*

“It’s rather too late for that.”

“You didn’t need to say it. Goodbye, priestess.”

“Indeed. Take care on the way back to Roses.”

I gave a small nod and left her room.

So...the person I’d marry? She hadn’t said a name, but now I was kind of curious. I was somewhat restless about it for the rest of the day.

An Afternoon with the Princess and Her Knight

◇ Furiae’s Perspective ◇

We were going to be leaving for Roses tonight, so this was our last day in Cameron. I was spacing out in the lobby when my knight walked up—he’d finished checking us out of our lodging.

“Eh? What’s wrong, Noah?” he muttered into the air. “Ahhh...right, right, fine.”

He was (probably) speaking to that goddess he followed. My knight was a believer in the Wicked Deity Noah; apparently, he could not only hear her voice, but see her as well. I found that last part hard to believe.

Just then, the red-headed mage and the fluttery-clothed warrior walked up.

“Makoto, let’s go shopping for gear!”

“Let’s go to a café!”

“Oof!”

The two of them caught him in a tackle hug. Since he was pretty weak, it ended up pushing him to the floor...

There are so many people in the lobby—what are you two playing at?

“Me first,” the mage protested. “After all, I did ask first.”

“Only by a second!” argued the warrior. “We should settle it with rock-paper-scissors!”

“No way! You just change what you use once you see what I pick!”

“W-Well...who knows.”

“I knew it! You *were* cheating!”

“Come on, both of you...” My knight tried to mediate as the two of them started arguing on top of him. From the outside, it looked like a real catfight. The staff eventually warned them about the ruckus, and the three of them got to their feet and bowed.

Those three...

I walked over to them.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Oh, Princess,” my knight greeted before turning back to the other two. He was adjusting his schedule—or, more like negotiating it—to try and grant both of their demands. He tried splitting the day into morning and afternoon, but both of them wanted the afternoon, and so they started arguing again. Eventually, they decided to just go around together.

Uh, and what about me? You’re supposed to be my guardian knight.

“Say...my knight, it seems like you’re neglecting me somewhat...” I pointed out.

“What?! N-No, I’m not, really...”

“Really?”

“Okay, then... You come with us too.”

“I suppose...”

And that was how the four of us ended up walking around town together. There were so many places to go—shops lined with cute clothes, places to eat, and so on. The mage and warrior browsed them all, but I didn’t have the stamina. I looked at my knight and saw that he was just practicing his water magic.

“Are you sure you should leave the two of them?” I asked.

“Hmm, they’re having fun, right? It’ll be fine.”

“If you say so.”

He was surprisingly practical about this kind of thing. After a while, the mage and the warrior came back out of the shops.

“What do you think?” the mage asked, modeling a new dress.

“It shows too much,” I replied.

“Aww!”

“Takatsuki!” exclaimed the warrior. “I bought crepes. Here you go!” She held one out to him.

“W-Well, we already ate...”

“Just take it already!” She grabbed him and stuffed the crepe into his mouth.

“Mgh!”

As he chewed it down, the water butterflies he’d conjured fluttered all around us. Some children on the street thought they were some kind of performance and started clapping.

My knight...really takes things at his own pace. As I gazed at those three, I came to understand that they were just selfish.

I let out a sigh, sank down onto a nearby bench, and watched the people passing by on the street. I’d been doing this sort of thing a lot lately.

I never could back in Laphroaig.

“Here, Princess.”

I startled, jumping slightly. “What?”

My knight had sat down next to me. He held out a cup to me, filled with some kind of beverage. As I looked closer, I saw that it was chilled fruit juice with pulp.

I took a sip. *Tasty...*

I glanced back at him, but it seemed like he’d already lost interest and had gone back to his practice.

So peaceful...

Life was just so calm...and almost boring at times. I never would’ve been able to imagine it just a few months ago.

I wanted things to continue like this forever.

Chat with a Goddess (Volume 5)

“Makoto! It’s awful!” Noah exclaimed.

“What is?”

I was in Noah’s space in my dreams. My physical body was currently fast asleep on Fujiyan’s airship, traveling back to Roses from Cameron.

“We’re only on volume five! If we keep up at this rate, we’ll run out of topics!”

“Do you think the fourth wall can stand up to that kind of abuse...?”

Discussing this didn’t strike me as the best idea.

“That’s why I’ve invited a guest this time! Eir, come on down!”

“Hiii!” gushed Eir. “Call my name, and I shall appear! I, guardian goddess of Roses, the lovely Eir!” She popped out of nowhere, flashing a sideways peace sign.

For goddesses, these two are way too easygoing...

“Now, let’s chat!” Noah cried, raising a finger to the air.

“Yayyy!” Eir cheered, adding a smattering of applause.

What's with this skit? Something was bothering me more than the sketch, though.

“Um... Don't you two get along a little too well...? Especially for being a Titanea and a Sacred Deity?” After all, the legends said that these two races of gods had fought a war against one another.

The two of them stared at me blankly.

“Oh, right, Titanomachia...” Noah said suddenly. “I mean, it *was* fifteen million years ago...”

“It was our parents that actually waged the war,” explained Eir. “Our generation was uninvolved... I think maybe Althena and Noah are the only ones who are old enough.”

“I was only there right at the end, so we practically never fought.”

“Huh... Hang on. Noah's the older one of you two?” I asked.

I'd sorta seen Eir as the “older sister” in their relationship.

“You shouldn't ask a woman her age, Makoto. You lose points for that.” chided Noah.

“I'm about ten thousand years younger, Mako.”

“Oh, trying to play the young angle? That's irresponsible rounding!”

R-Rounding...? The goddesses really are beyond human comprehension.

We spent the next little while talking about “the old days.” I'd read about these historical events, but the details sounded a bit different coming from people who'd actually been involved. Still...the goddess I followed *had* lost in the war. That much was a fact. Therefore, I knew what I had to do...

“So, once I've broken you out of the Seafloor Temple, I need to start a divine war to reinstate the Titanea, right?” I asked.

Both of their faces immediately turned deadly serious.

Uh...?

“Makoto...”

“Mako...”

They were both speaking in unison. It was honestly kinda scary.

“Y-Yeah?” I stammered.

“The first thing’s all you need to do.”

“You shouldn’t talk about starting a divine war, even as a joke.”

I could only nod. *Uh...why shouldn’t I, though?*

“You just shouldn’t!”

“It’s beyond the scope of humans!”

I just sighed, defeated. Still, I was the one who decided on my own goals.

“I’m telling you no!” Noah yelled, bracing me in an arm lock.

Oh... She’s nice and soft...

Still in that dreamy state of mind, I woke up.

The Hero of Roses and the Guild Receptionist

“Welcome home, Makoto!”

As I walked into the guild, Mary greeted me with a flying hug.

“It’s good to be back,” I told her.

“I was so lonely...”

“It hasn’t even been a week.”

“I was still lonely! Come on, tell me about Cameron.” She pulled me over to a food stall near the entrance. “Here.” That word was accompanied by the massive thud of a huge tankard slamming onto the table.

“Um...what?” *She’s still on duty, right?*

“I’m in charge of you, so entertaining is part of my job,” she said with a wink. It was cute, but she’d already chugged half of her ale. Drinking while on duty was... Oh, the guild master was letting it go. *Really?*

“Um, well first, I had a meeting with the priestess...” I began.

“Mmhmm, mhmm. And then?”

“Then I met up with Princess Noelle and Sak—the Hero of Light.”

“What?! Tell me everything!”

Surprisingly, she was actually pretty serious about getting a full report.



“Now that you’ve relayed the report, it’s time to have some fun!”

“Don’t you still have to work this afternoon?” I asked.

“I took time off.”

“Well...okay then.”

She pulled me out of the guild and dragged me around town. If I’d been new to the town (like Furiae was) then it wouldn’t have seemed so strange, but I’d lived in Macallan for quite a while now, so I certainly knew my way around.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Any preferences?”

“Hmm, I’d like to take it easy. Cameron was hectic.”

“Something relaxing, then... What about that?” she asked, pointing.

It was a place hiring out boats for the canals.



“Need a rower?” the attendant asked.

“No, we’ll be fine on our own.”

“Sure. It’ll be a thousand for the day. Bring it back here when you’re done.”

“Got it.”

I paid and then offered a hand to Mary as we got in. As soon as we were on board, the boat set off.

“H-Huh...? It’s moving on its own?”

“I’m using water magic,” I explained.

“Oh, wow! Won’t that get tiring, though?”

“I could do this all day,” I assured her. “Actually, this doesn’t even count as training. Let’s up the ante a bit.”

“What? H-Hold on!”

And Mary did exactly that as she panicked, grabbing on to me.

“Water Magic: Flow.”

Instantly, the boat sped up by a lot.

“Ahhhhhh!” Mary screamed as it skipped along the water like a speed boat.



“Ma. Ko. Tooooo.”

“Sorry,” I murmured. I’d had too much fun and now she was angry.

The twists and turns had made her seasick, so she was currently curled up with her head in my lap. We were now on Lake Chimay, near the town. There wasn’t any wind, and the atmosphere was peaceful, so we just talked for a while.

“It’s tough keeping up with you...” she admitted eventually.

“Really? I actually had a lot of fun.”

At that, she giggled. “I did too. Should we head back now?”

Just as I opened my mouth to respond, she sat up and quickly brought her lips to mine for a brief kiss.

Dumbfounded, I asked, “Mary?”

“This counts as entertainment for work too.”

“I’m pretty sure it doesn’t.”

“Anyway...let’s go.” She paused for a moment, then said, “Oh?”

It looked like she’d seen something in the distance, so I glanced in the same direction. Floating through the air was a giant bird made entirely of fire.

Was that? Well, there wasn’t anyone else who’d cast that spell...

“Lucy and Aya are glaring at us,” Mary informed me.

“Then...let’s not go back just yet.”

“Nope!” exclaimed Mary. “Come on, back to the guild!”

That was the end of our date...and the rest of the night was spent under heavy interrogation by Lucy and Sasa.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: The Water Goddess's Prophecy](#)

[Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Returns to Macallan](#)

[Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki's Old Haunts](#)

[Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with His Goddess](#)

[Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Learns *Mana Blade*](#)

[Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Faces Danger](#)

[Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Speaks with the Priestess of the Moon](#)

[Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Heads for Cameron](#)

[Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Searches for the Ghost Ship](#)

[Epilogue: Banquet in Cameron](#)

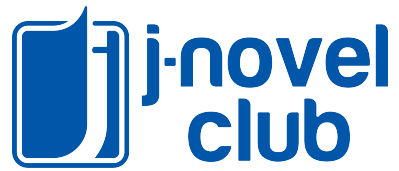
[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Full Clearing Another World under a Goddess with Zero Believers: Volume 5

by Isle Osaki

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